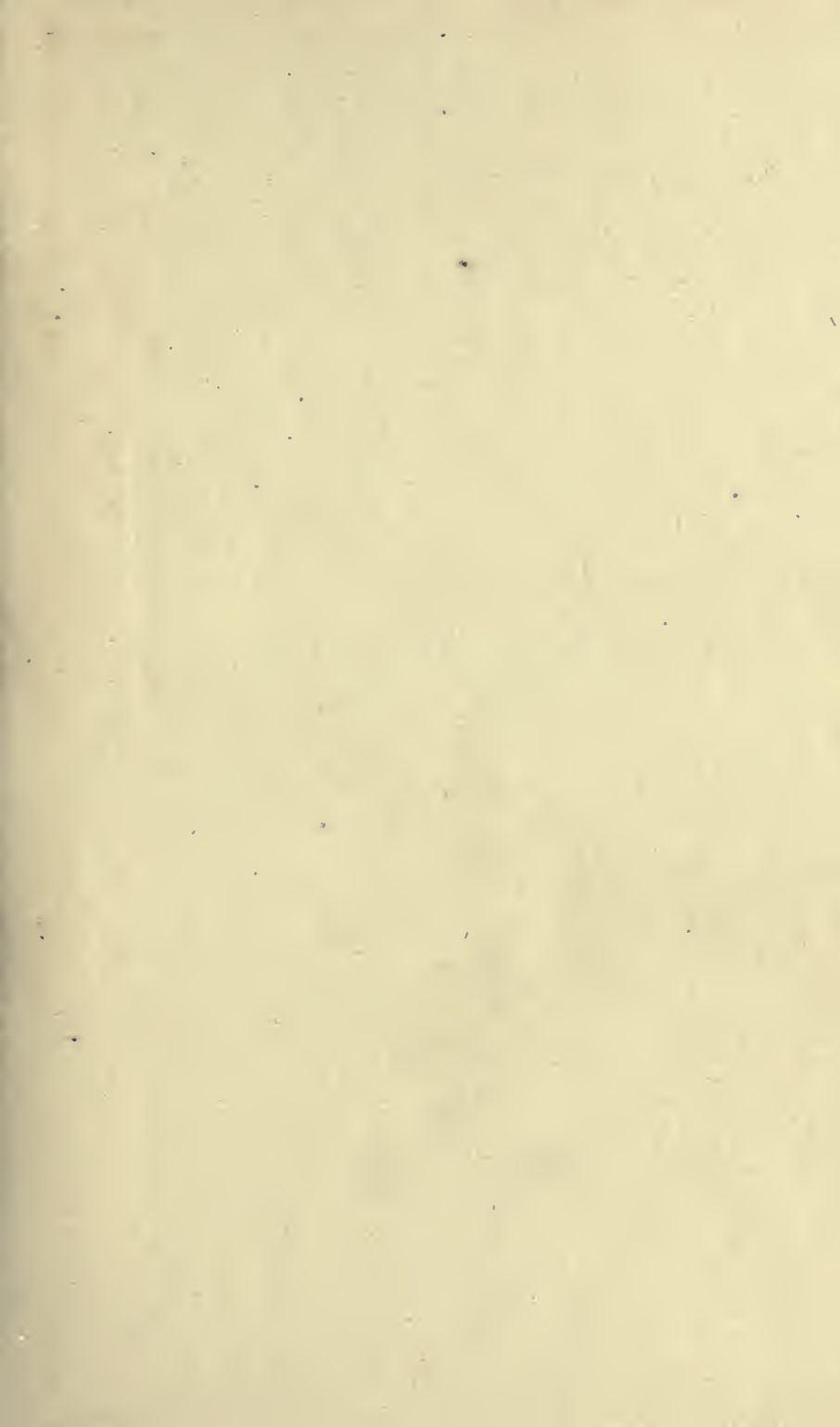


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**LIFE OF THE RIGHT  
HON. JESSE COLLINGS**



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*Photo. H. J. Whitlock & Sons, Ltd.*

MR. JESSE COLLINGS IN 1886



# LIFE OF THE RIGHT HON. JESSE COLLINGS

PART I

By THE RT. HON. JESSE COLLINGS

PART II

By SIR JOHN L. GREEN, O.B.E.

(LATE SECRETARY OF THE RURAL LEAGUE)

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY THE  
RIGHT HON. AUSTEN CHAMBERLAIN, M.P.

*WITH NUMEROUS ILLUSTRATIONS*

LONGMANS, GREEN AND CO.  
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## INTRODUCTION

A LIFE of Mr. Collings, begun by himself and finished by his friend and fellow-worker, Sir J. L. Green, is certain to secure a wide circle of readers, for in a long life of public service Mr. Collings has made friends in all classes, and though he has fought his public battles with all his might they have left no bitterness behind them.

It is a far cry from the Devonshire of Mr. Collings' boyhood to the England of to-day; and his recollections of the village sports and pastimes of those far-off years are doubly valuable, for they form a record of customs and manners long since passed away. I miss some details that I have heard from his own lips; for instance, how his sailor-brother insisted upon putting back to the wreck—of which the story is told in Chapter X—to recover his silk hat at the peril of all their lives. Or again, of his last visit to his stonemason brother, Tom. Tom became a Baptist, and preached at a local chapel; forfeiting thereby his right to work on the great estate on which he was employed, for such was the rule of the estate less than eighty years ago. "I'm

v

sorry, Tom," said the agent when dismissing him, "but you know the rule." "Well," replied Tom, "you can't say that ever I did a bad day's work for you."

In his old age Tom had become rather deaf, and he did not hear Mr. Collings as he lifted the latch and entered the cottage where Tom had just sat down to his dinner, singing the "Old Hundredth" as a grace before meat. After the first exchange of greetings, Tom began questioning his brother about his soul's salvation, for he was always troubled about their difference of religious views. "Don't let us talk of that," said Mr. Collings. "You know, Tom, that try as we will, we shall never agree." "Well," said Tom (and the answer seems to me singularly beautiful), "I sit here in my chair and look out over the harbour and see the ships beating this way and that across the bar, but they all come to rest against the quay at last. So may it be with us!"

I dwell on these early incidents, for to hear Mr. Collings speak of them, to see his face light up and grow soft and tender whilst his speech itself dropped back at moments into broad Devon, was to understand the passion of his life, his devotion to the land, and to the humble folk who tilled it. I have heard from an eye-witness how in the early 'nineties Mr. Collings was announced to speak in a village in the

Cotswolds in the course of a hotly-contested by-election. Through some mistake there was no carriage to meet him at the station, and he trudged a long five miles through miry winter lanes to the meeting-place to find the audience already assembled and eagerly studying a leaflet placed in their hands by an agent of the opposite party as they entered the schoolroom. The Chairman was perturbed, for the leaflet contained a bitter attack on Mr. Collings, accusing him amongst other things of kicking away the ladder by which he had risen, and of deserting the agricultural labourers. "I fear," said the Chairman, "we shall have a row." Mr. Collings' course was characteristic. He began his speech by reading the leaflet aloud. "Do I look that sort of man?" he asked. And then he told them of his early days, of the struggles of his parents, and of the sacrifices they had made for their children; and, as the simple pathos of the story grew upon his hearers and the transparent honesty of the man shone forth, those who had come to jeer or to condemn were stirred to tears. As the House of Commons knew him Mr. Collings was no orator, but to a village audience he spoke the language that they understood, and his words were strangely moving.

His early work was in the sphere of education; first in connection with the foundation of the Industrial School at Exeter, and then in connection

with the famous National Education League, whose headquarters were at Birmingham. Here he first met my father, never afterwards in all the vicissitudes of fortune to leave his side, the most faithful and tender friend and the most loyal colleague that heart of man could desire. Together they toured the country in support of the programme of the League ; together they bearded Mr. Gladstone ; and together they lived to see the crown put to their educational work by Lord Salisbury when he made primary education free.

Then Mr. Collings enlisted my father's interest in his programme for the agricultural labourer. " Three acres and a cow." How far off seems now the commotion which that cry raised ! How conservative the programme itself ! The War has revolutionized the position of the agricultural labourer ; but the thousands of allotments which have sprung into existence, the land settlement which is beginning, the new race of yeomen-farmers owning the land they cultivate—these have their origin in the long fight which Mr. Collings waged against prejudice, indifference, and apathy, a fight begun before the agricultural labourer had a vote and could make his voice heard in elections.

It has been my privilege to know Mr. Collings intimately from my early childhood. He loved children, understood their ways, and won their

hearts as surely as he won the hearts of their elders. It is not easy to express all that one feels of gratitude and affection for such a friend ; but surely I may say that the character here revealed is one of singular beauty, and that all who value courage and perseverance, unselfish devotion and inflexible honesty, will welcome this simple record of his early struggles and honourable public service.

AUSTEN CHAMBERLAIN

*March 27th, 1920*





# CONTENTS

## PART I

### BEFORE ENTERING PARLIAMENT

CHAPTER	PAGE
INTRODUCTION . . . . .	v
PREFACE TO PART I . . . . .	i
I. ANCESTRY AND EARLY HISTORY . . . . .	3
II. SOME DEVON CUSTOMS . . . . .	17
III. "FOUR ACRES" AND EARLY HOME LIFE . . . . .	22
IV. PRICE OF FOOD IN MY BOYHOOD . . . . .	28
V. AN EPOCH IN LIFE . . . . .	31
VI. AT WORK: AN INCIDENT WHICH HAD RESULTS . . . . .	35
VII. DEVON TO LONDON: FATHER'S DECEASE . . . . .	38
VIII. OFF TO BIRMINGHAM: EARLY DAYS THERE . . . . .	44
IX. LETTERS FROM AND A VISIT TO HOME . . . . .	50
X. BACK TO BIRMINGHAM: ILLNESS, A VOYAGE AND SHIPWRECK . . . . .	53
XI. COMMERCIAL TRAVELLING IN OLD DAYS . . . . .	66
XII. ANOTHER EPOCH: HAPPILY MARRIED . . . . .	69
XIII. RETURN TO DEVON: EARLY REFORM WORK . . . . .	73
XIV. THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR: OPPOSITION TO CURRENT VIEWS . . . . .	80
XV. ONCE MORE IN BIRMINGHAM: HEAD OF THE BUSINESS: FURTHER REFORM WORK . . . . .	85
XVI. TOWN COUNCILLOR; AND MAYOR . . . . .	91

## PART II

## MR. COLLINGS AND LAND REFORM

CHAPTER		PAGE
	PREFACE TO PART II . . . . .	109
XVII.	MR. COLLINGS ENTERS PARLIAMENT . . . . .	112
XVIII.	A MOTION ON THE LAND QUESTION : THE FARMERS' ALLIANCE, ETC. . . . .	122
XIX.	ALLOTMENTS EXTENSION ACT : AND THE FRANCHISE OF THE FARM LABOURERS . . . . .	140
XX.	ANOTHER MOTION IN PARLIAMENT : MR. GLADSTONE AND THE LABOURERS . . . . .	153
XXI.	FRANCHISE AGAIN : A PEASANT PROPRIETARY : "THREE ACRES AND A COW" : MIGRATION AND EMIGRATION . . . . .	170
XXII.	LORD SALISBURY, MR. GLADSTONE, AND THE FARM LABOURERS . . . . .	182
XXIII.	THE ALLOTMENTS AND SMALL HOLDINGS ASSOCIATION ; AND THE RURAL LABOURERS' LEAGUE . . . . .	196
XXIV.	AGRICULTURAL EDUCATION AND SMALL HOLDINGS BILLS . . . . .	206
XXV.	THE FIRST SMALL HOLDINGS ACT . . . . .	212
XXVI.	PARISH COUNCILS : CHARITY COMMISSIONERS AND RURAL CHARITIES . . . . .	218
XXVII.	OCCUPYING OWNERSHIP : A VISIT ABROAD : FISCAL POLICY . . . . .	230
XXVIII.	"AN AGRICULTURAL PARTY" : SALVATION ARMY AND EMIGRATION . . . . .	244
XXIX.	"AN ISLAND CITADEL" : ANOTHER SMALL HOLDINGS REPORT . . . . .	252
XXX.	MR. A. BALFOUR AND SOCIAL REFORM . . . . .	258
XXXI.	A JOURNEY TO FRANCE : AN UNFORTUNATE ACCIDENT . . . . .	269
XXXII.	THE RURAL LEAGUE : LAND BANKS : TWO PRESENTATIONS . . . . .	278
XXXIII.	THE HOUSE OF COMMONS : "NUNC DIMITTIS" . . . . .	286
XXXIV.	A CREDITABLE WAR ACHIEVEMENT . . . . .	291
XXXV.	CONCLUSION . . . . .	299

## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

	<i>Frontispiece</i> FACE PAGE
MR. COLLINGS IN 1886 . . . . . <i>From photograph by H. J. Whitlock and Sons, Ltd.</i>	Frontispiece
MR. COLLINGS' MOTHER . . . . .	xiv
THE BIRTH-PLACE OF MR. COLLINGS' MOTHER . . . . .	xiv
BROADHEMBURY CHURCH . . . . .	5
LITTLEHAM VILLAGE, EXMOUTH . . . . .	12
A VIEW OF EXMOUTH . . . . .	12
THE COTTAGE AT LITTLEHAM WHERE MR. COLLINGS' FATHER AND MOTHER LIVED . . . . .	28
LITTLEHAM PARISH CHURCH . . . . .	49
MR. COLLINGS' UNCLE (WILLIAM COLLINGS) . . . . .	64
CANDLE-SNUFFERS, A CIDER (OR BEER) WARMER, A PAIR OF PATTENS' . . . . .	69
DEVON AND EXETER BOYS' INDUSTRIAL SCHOOL, EXMINSTER . . . . .	76
THE BOY RADFORD . . . . .	76
MR. COLLINGS, AGED 30 . . . . . <i>From photograph by W. and D. Downey.</i>	81
MR. COLLINGS; COMMERCIAL TRAVELLING . . . . .	96
MRS. JESSE COLLINGS . . . . . <i>From photograph by H. J. Whitlock and Sons, Ltd.</i>	113
OLD WATER MILL AT WITHYCOMBE . . . . .	128
A SAMPLER . . . . .	263
MR. JESSE COLLINGS IN 1908 . . . . . <i>From photograph by H. J. Whitlock and Sons, Ltd.</i>	266





MR. COLLINGS' MOTHER



THE BIRTHPLACE OF MR. COLLINGS' MOTHER

*(See pages 5 and 6)*



**PART I**  
**BEFORE ENTERING PARLIAMENT**





## PREFACE TO PART I

I HAVE been frequently urged by many friends to write some account of my life. I have hitherto refrained from doing so, as I could not see any reason why people should be interested in the career of one whose life, though somewhat eventful, is similar to that of thousands of others who have been thrown on their own resources and have had to work their way up from poverty and obscurity to a fair competence and to a public position.

Besides this, I have never kept a diary, but contented myself with making fragmentary notes of special events, as they occurred, especially of those which changed the current of my life.

My memory, however, is a very good one. In youth we look forward to the future; while in old age we mainly dwell on the past, and review even the smallest happenings from the far-off days of childhood and youth. As we grow older, we shed our youthful illusions and learn to look on life in its hard reality.

I found out that happiness was a comparative term, and that there was no position in life, however high, but had its drawbacks, and, however low, without its compensations. I found as much

## 2 LIFE OF RIGHT HON. JESSE COLLINGS

pleasure in a sixpenny plant bought in the market and tended and watched in my lodgings as, in later years, I found in the possession of gardens and greenhouses.

As a young man I formed few definite plans for the future. The earlier events of life were determined for me—not from choice but from necessity. I soon learnt that genius and ability were not so necessary for success in life as work, labour, and a diligent discharge of the task, however humble, that I happened to have in hand. I endeavoured, to the best of my ability, to follow the injunction “whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might,” or, as it is quaintly expressed in the well-known doggerel lines :

“ If a cobbler by trade, I’ll make it my pride,  
The best of all cobblers to be ;  
And if only a tinker, no tinker on earth  
Shall mend an old kettle like me.”

More important than all, I have been blessed with some of the highest prizes in the lottery of life, namely, good parents, a good wife, and a good daughter. These, with their influence, association, sympathy and help, form the chief features in the picture of my life. All else, in comparison, are only insets in the drawing.

JESSE COLLINGS

SOUTHFIELD,  
EGBASTON, BIRMINGHAM.

# LIFE OF THE RIGHT HON. JESSE COLLINGS

## CHAPTER I

### ANCESTRY AND EARLY HISTORY

THE small agricultural village of Broadhembury, in Devonshire—four and a half miles from Ottery St. Mary—is situated on a bleak hill overlooking the Vale of Honiton and just below the old Roman Encampment on Hembury Fort Hill.

Here the Palmer families lived, generation after generation, from time immemorial. They were always engaged in agriculture, or in trades connected therewith.

There is evidence, however, that the Palmers were not always mere labourers. My mother, for example, inherited articles of considerable value, which must have belonged to those in a good position. Among these articles were several leather-bound folio Bibles, some choice old china, and several old-pattern, heavy silver tablespoons, with the initials of the family name marked on them, together with the date of 1713.

There is not the least doubt that the family were

originally peasant proprietors, and that they, in common with most of that class, were squeezed out of existence by the iniquitous administration of the Enclosure Acts, and became landless men, working as wage earners on land of which they had been dispossessed.

The first Public Enclosure Act was passed in 1709 ; after that date no less than 300,000 Public Enclosure Acts were passed by Parliament, in which the power of landlords was supreme. Millions of acres of land which belonged to the yeoman and peasant class, were thus confiscated and passed into the hands of



WARMING PAN

great landlords. By these enclosures the keystone was knocked out of the arch of peasant proprietary, and the peasants became broken men.

It was quite common to find in labourers' cottages articles of value which had been inherited by labourers from their forebears who had been in a better position. I remember visiting a widow Palmer, an aged cousin of mine. In her cottage was one of the old mahogany-cased "grandfather clocks," a very expensive article. In the cupboard was some old china. On the mantelshelf were a brass pestle and mortar, and a pair of handsome brass candlesticks, whilst a brass and a copper warming-pan were hanging on the walls, etc.





FROADHEMBURY CHURCH

*(See page 5)*

The fine old church of Broadhembury, erected in the thirteenth century, contains, among other memorials, a tablet erected to the memory of the Rev. Augustus Toplady, who was vicar of the parish from 1768 to 1778. He was the author of the hymn "Rock of Ages," one of the finest lyrics in the English language, and it is still sung in every clime where the mother tongue is spoken.

The parish register kept in the church records the baptisms, marriages, and burials in the parish from the year 1538 to the year 1916. The Palmers' names appear continuously in it. In the first year of the register, 1538, it is recorded that Joane Palmer was buried on the 13th "daie of Aprill." In 1563, Alice, daughter of Richard Palmer, was baptised on the 25th "daie" of January; and so on year after year until 1916.

In the early years of the register the men were generally described as yeomen, or the sons of yeomen, but in later years they were nearly all described as labourers. In 1786 my mother's name appears as follows: "Elizabeth, daughter of John and Ann Palmer, was baptised on June 5th." One of the latest entries in the register was that of Sarah Palmer, who died in 1910. The present vicar, the Rev. Lister James, informs me that she worked hard in the fields and brought up eleven children on eight shillings a week, out of which she paid twopence a week for schooling for each child.

My grandparents, John and Ann Palmer, had six

## 6 LIFE OF RIGHT HON. JESSE COLLINGS

children, viz. three sons and three daughters—Elizabeth, Susan, and Catherine. Elizabeth, the eldest, was my mother.

During my visits to Broadhembury I had several interviews with an aged farmer named Weekes, who gave me some particulars of the Palmer family. He showed me, too, the cottage in which my grandparents lived ; in which their children were born ; and of which I had a photograph taken.

“ Thy grandfeyther,” he said, in his broad Devon dialect, “ were the vinest all-round agricultural labourer in the parish ”—a distinction of which I felt very proud. “ He worked for I,” he continued, “ from a boy till from old age he could work no longer. He came, however, on butter-making days to turn the churn, and on other days to do odd jobs.”

My grandfather’s “ dree dawters ” worked for the same farmer. He paid them sixpence a day as girls, and ninepence a day as young women, with an allowance of cider.

Farmer Weekes could give me no later information about them, except that they left his employ and “ went off ” by the carrier’s cart, each with a bundle of clothes. He had no knowledge of their destination.

“ Going off ” in those days was a far more important event than emigration to overseas countries is to-day. The means of communication were so scanty that little or nothing was heard afterwards of those who had “ gone off,” and they were mostly



forgotten by the people of the locality they had left.

Farmer Weekes told me that the eldest of my grandfather's three sons was a blacksmith, the second a wheelwright, and that the third—a baker by trade—enlisted in the 13th Light Dragoons. This last, after completing twenty-one years' service, retired from the Army with a pension, and ultimately settled at Exmouth as a baker.

From other sources I learnt that my mother, after leaving Broadhembury, went into domestic service at Topsham, about four miles from Exeter. My father, Thomas Collings, was a bricklayer at Lympstone, near Topsham, where he met my mother and married her. After their marriage, they settled in a small cottage in the parish of Littleham, which was the country-side of Exmouth. In this cottage ten out of their eleven children were born. A few years ago, during a visit to Exmouth, I had a photograph taken of this cottage. It has since been pulled down and a cart-house built in its place.

My mother's second sister, Catherine, went into service at Exmouth, where she married a tailor named Druller, who died and left her a widow with one daughter. She then became a laundress, and did fairly well in that calling.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Exmouth is beautifully situated at the mouth of the river Exe, and is now one of the most charming and salubrious watering-places in the kingdom. At the time referred to, it was a very small place, dependent on fishing and agriculture. Miss Buller and her sister,

## 8 LIFE OF RIGHT HON. JESSE COLLINGS

My mother's sister, Susan, went into service at Exeter, where she married a man named Rogers, who died and left her a widow with one daughter. She afterwards became housekeeper to Canon Nutcombe, one of the canons of Exeter Cathedral. I remember her as a handsome old lady in a mob cap and with grey hair. Her daughter Charlotte was a girl of exceptional beauty and was apprenticed to a dressmaker. In going to her work every day she passed one of the masters (ushers as they were then called) of Mount Radford College—a Scotsman named Cluness. After a time he made her acquaintance, fell in love with her, and, in spite of the opposition of his friends, who regarded her as far beneath him socially, he married her.

He left the college and opened a school at Stoke, near Devonport, which soon became very successful. "Cousin Charlotte," as we called her, made him an excellent wife; she was much beloved by the pupils; and was very popular with the parents. Mr. Cluness ascribed the success of his school largely to the assistance he received from his wife. This marriage, as will be seen later on, was destined to form an epoch in my life.

My father worked for some time in the parish of

aunts of the late Sir Redvers Buller, were the principal residents. On one occasion in later years, when sitting next to Sir Redvers at a dinner party, he was much amused at my claiming relationship with him on the ground that my aunt did the washing of his aunt's clothes.

Littleham, as a journeyman bricklayer at twelve shillings a week, which were the usual wages at that time for skilled workmen.

After working there for some years he began business for himself as a small builder. He was greatly handicapped for want of education. He could read a little with difficulty, and his writing was a scrawl that could scarcely be deciphered. Nevertheless, his natural intelligence and ability were so great that he became fairly successful.

John, my eldest brother, was brought up as a bricklayer. He was a clever young man ; and, under my father's directions, he prepared the plans and estimates for the houses which my father built. No architect was employed. Thomas, the second son, was a stonemason ; and Walter, the third son, was a carpenter.<sup>1</sup>

These sons, working with my father, enabled him to build cheaply. He had, however, the reputation of building well and with good materials.

In those days there was very little machinery ; doors, window-frames, joists, flooring-boards, etc., were made at home instead of being imported. My father made a saw-pit where balks of timber were sawn by two sawyers ; one being at the top of the balks, the other underneath.

Increasing business made it necessary for my father to leave the small cottage referred to in the

<sup>1</sup> Henry, the fourth son, was a sailor, and I, the youngest son, was kept at home and taught no trade.

illustration. Accordingly, in 1828, he built a house for himself; in which I was born in 1831. The house itself was small, but it had a large yard, where workshops were established. There was not much bedroom accommodation. Two brothers and myself slept in a tiny room<sup>1</sup> which led into my mother's room. It had no fire-place or any other means of ventilation. In case of children's diseases there were no means of isolation. I remember having an attack of small-pox, and during its progress I slept with my brothers as usual; the only precaution taken being to tie my hands in bags to prevent my scratching the pustules. Having been inoculated while in good health the attack was a mild one, and no visible marks remained upon me. Inoculation consisted in taking the matter from the arm of one child and injecting it into the arm of another child, thus producing small-pox in an artificial manner. Inoculation was prohibited by law some years afterwards. It was superseded by Dr. Jenner's discovery of vaccination, which consisted of taking the matter from the cow instead of from the human being. In my young days this pestilential disease was very rife, and every sixth or seventh person one met was marked with small-pox.

A small part of the field adjoining our house was railed off for a flower garden, the care of which was allotted to me. We grew only the old-fashioned

<sup>1</sup> I measured this room not long since and found it to be 15 feet by 9 feet.

flowers—hollyhocks, sunflowers, gillyflowers, sweet peas, violets, daffodils, etc. Besides these, however, there were herbs of several kinds—lavender, rosemary, marjoram, dandelion, camomile, etc. My mother, like most peasant women, believed in the efficacy of herbs for children's ailments. Accordingly, we were occasionally dosed with dandelion tea, camomile tea, and other concoctions.

My father, as I knew him, was a fine, broad-shouldered, well-built man of middle height, with a kindly face and white hair. He wore yellow breeches, and a blue coat cut Quaker fashion, with large brass buttons. He was very fond of his children, especially of myself, his youngest-born. He nursed me on his knee till I was nine or ten years old, and I was invariably called by the family "father's baby." I regret that I have no portrait of him; but I have one of his brother, my Uncle William. The two were so much alike that they might have been taken for twins.

My father went to church every Sunday morning, and expected that his children should go with him.

The church in those days was far different from what it is to-day. There were long galleries each side, at the back of which the Charity School children sat. The seats in the middle of the floor of the church were all free, and occupied by the poorer and labouring classes. These rows of seats were divided by a passage, on one side of which sat the men and on the other side the women.

The pulpit was what was called a "three-decker." The lowest "deck" was occupied by the clerk, who gave the responses, in which the congregation did not join. From the second "deck," the clergyman read the lessons and the other parts of the service; after which he ascended to the upper "deck" and preached the sermon. He was arrayed in a black Geneva gown with black bands, no white surplices being then worn.

Every Sunday afternoon the younger children, each with a Bible, read verses by turn. This practice led to an intimate knowledge of the Scripture, but it was a perfunctory task and had little or no influence whatever on conduct. When the reading was finished we played our games; the clergyman of the time not being opposed to Sunday afternoon sports.

My mother did not attend church or chapel. She had, however, a kindly feeling towards members of all denominations. She was a deeply religious woman, but with no knowledge of creeds or care for dogma of any kind. Her daily life carried with it an atmosphere of charity and affection. There was a strain of reverent fatalism in her character, and in any trouble or misfortune she always said, "It is so ordained by One above."

The only education my brothers and sisters received was that given in the Church schools. The education was free, and at that time was considered good. As a child I went to a Dame's school, kept



LITTLEHAM VILLAGE, EXMOUTH  
*(See pages 7 and 9)*



A VIEW OF EXMOUTH  
*(See page 7)*





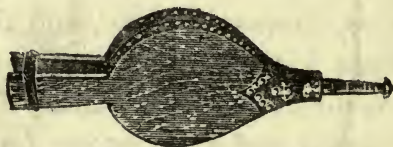
by an old lady who charged twopence a week for each child. The pupils numbered about twenty, whom she taught in her kitchen, and at the same time she attended to the cooking of her modest dinner. Later on, my father being in rather better circumstances, he sent me to a school established for tradesmen's sons. The fees were six pounds a year, and the teaching consisted mainly of reading, writing, and arithmetic; which, however, were taught well.

My passion for reading began early, but it was difficult to get books. We had in the house *Fox's Book of Martyrs*, *Robinson Crusoe*, and *The Pilgrim's Progress*. These I read and re-read. There were, as far as I remember, only two "cheap" periodicals, *The Family Herald* and *The London Journal*, which I took weekly. Newspapers were too dear to buy. In consequence of the stamp duty, paper duty, and the advertisement duty—duties which were not abolished till many years afterwards—the price of a newspaper was usually sevenpence.

My father, when he went to Exeter, brought me some books, bought for a few pence at a second-hand book-stall. They were a strange medley, as he knew nothing whatever about books. I devoured them all, however, regardless of their subjects. Every evening, seated at a small round table, by the light of a slender tallow-candle, which served to light the whole room, I read till bedtime.

In those days the trade of the tallow-chandler

was an important one. All households in country places were lit with candles : and, when the top end of the wick required shortening (so as to enable the candle to give more light) it was shortened by using a pair of candle-snuffers. The bellows, too, for blowing air into the fire for creating a flame or greater heat were equally common. Paraffin and paraffin lamps were unknown. Rushlights—i.e. candles with rushes instead of cotton for wicks—were used in sick rooms on account of their cheapness (one farthing each) and also because they burnt



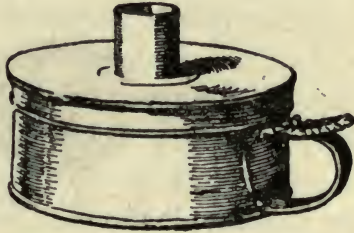
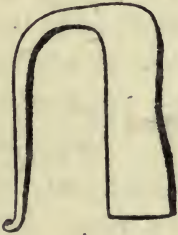
PAIR OF BELLOWS

slowly and lasted throughout the night. Lighting by gas was general in large towns, but it had not found its way into the villages. Friction matches had been invented, but they were sold at prohibitive prices. The villages were dark, and people found their way about by the light of horn lanterns.

Light was obtained by a slow process. A piece of rag was reduced to tinder and with a flint and steel a spark was produced which ignited the tinder. A wooden match tipped with brimstone was next applied, a flame was produced, and then the candle lighted. Inside the tinder-box was a round piece of tin called a "damper," used to extinguish the

lighted tinder. Flint, steel, and matches were then placed in the tinder-box, which was stood on a shelf ready for further use. A tinder-box was found in every house in the land, from the mansion to the cottage.

Daylight was economised as much as possible. The family were all in bed about eight o'clock and rose not later than five o'clock in the summer and six in the winter. The younger boys made their morning's toilet, winter and summer, in the wash-



TINDER-BOX

house ; with a tub of cold water and a brush and comb common to all. We wore no flannels, and the same shirts were worn day and night ; so that undressing, whether for washing or bathing, was a very simple affair.

The streets were rarely if ever cleansed, and on rainy days were always so deep in mud that women invariably wore pattens—a flat piece of wood fastened by straps to the shoe, under which wood an iron ring was fixed—which lifted the foot about two inches from the ground.

In those days very few houses had wells attached to them. Water was commonly drawn from the village pump, which was quite an institution. Those who came to draw water generally remained some little time gossiping and talking over the affairs of the day and discussing their neighbours' doings.



## CHAPTER II

### SOME DEVON CUSTOMS

MY mother was very indulgent to her children. She ruled them by love, and let them go their own ways, without worrying them with precepts as to what they should or what they should not do. Any mischief they did was not concealed from her, and was usually condoned. She seemed to have only two rules ; and these she strictly enforced. One was, that the children should obey the few commands she gave ; and the other, that they should conceal nothing and be open and truthful.

Once only as a child was I punished with a whipping, and that was for telling my mother an untruth. I did not mind the punishment ; but the troubled look on her face as she administered it was a lesson I did not forget.

My mother who had a vivid imagination had also a great store of proverbs and folk-lore. The time is still green in my memory when, cradled in her arms, she poured forth, in her broad Devon dialect, stories of the fairies and of other kinds, so delightful to a young child. I have never ceased to look back on those far-off days with gratitude and affection,

and the memory of my mother has been to me an abiding influence through life.

Being the youngest of the family, I only really knew my mother as a comely matron, with a clear, fresh complexion and a profusion of silvery white hair. I was told by my eldest sister and others who knew her at the time that as a young woman she was remarkably handsome. I had no portrait of her ; so, in 1850, during a visit home, I took her to Exeter to have one taken. She was then very old, but had retained the same clear complexion and other traces of her former good looks.

In those days, there were many customs—some pleasant, others far from pleasant—which have since disappeared. The belief in witchcraft, for example, was real. I knew a harmless old cobbler, whose cottage I saw several times invaded by a mob, and he himself ill-treated, in the belief locally that he had bewitched a woman, who was evidently suffering from epilepsy.

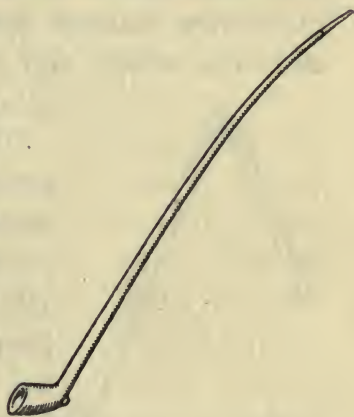
I remember, as a child, being sent into a house by some workmen—who had lost a certain tool—to borrow a Bible and a door-key. The men outside stood around in a ring, and one end of the key was inserted between the leaves of the Bible, and kept there by a cord tied tightly round the book. A string was then attached to the other end of the door-key, and the Bible was made to revolve. When it stopped, the man towards whom the head of the

Bible pointed was reckoned to be the thief, and was treated accordingly.

We all implicitly believed in the existence of the Devon fairies—the pixies. When a boy was late at school, or a workman was late at work, the plea that he had been “pixy led” was accepted as a valid excuse. Parents (believing what they said) told their children of the elfish doings of the pixies; described them as little creatures clothed in green, with silver slippers, dancing in a ring on the moor on moonlight nights; spoke of their fantastic tricks and antics—how they pinched the lazy dairymaids who did not wake and get up at the proper time, and how they sang the babies to sleep, etc. etc. “They be mortel curus little vokes; trait ’em well, and they’ll never do ’ee any harm,” etc.

The “harvest-home” was a high festival. When the last load of corn was placed in the stack and a sheaf of corn placed in the church, the harvesters—men and women—went into the farmer’s

kitchen to partake of his hospitality in the form of harvest supper. When the supper was over and the tables cleared, tobacco and long white clay pipes—“churchwardens,” as they were called—were placed on the table. Short wooden pipes, such as

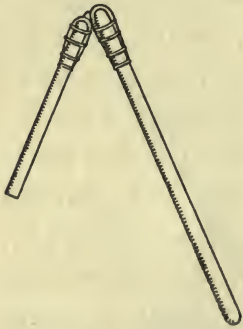


A “CHURCHWARDEN” PIPE

are so common now, were unknown. The farmer, who took the chair at the supper, then began the evening's proceedings with a song. The song was invariably one entitled "A Fine Old English Gentleman," of which the following is the first verse :

" I'll sing you a fine old song, that was made by an old pate,  
Of a worshipful old gentleman, who had a fine estate :  
He kept a brave old mansion, at a bountiful old rate,  
With a good old porter to relieve poor people at his gate,  
Like a brave old English gentleman, all of the olden time."

Then followed the chorus : " Like a brave old English gentleman, all of the olden time," in which the whole company joined. The song was followed by stories, harvest anecdotes, homely recitations, and other songs, and the festivity was kept up till a late hour.



A FLAIL

The soil was turned with a primitive plough, having a wooden beam and an iron coulter. The plough was generally drawn by six oxen, which formed a picturesque team. Sowing was done, not by machinery, but by hand. The sower, with measured steps, scattered the

seed over the earth with wonderful accuracy.

After the harvest was over people were allowed to go into the fields to glean ; and, as there was no machine-made reaper and binder in those days, the leavings were considerable. My brothers and



I used to glean many pecks of wheat after the harvest.

Threshing was done by flails, the use of which, by five or six labourers on the barn floor, caused the apartment to be full of rhythm on a winter's day.

## CHAPTER III

### “FOUR ACRES” AND EARLY HOME LIFE

WHEN my father began business for himself, he rented four acres of land, two acres of which were attached to the new house he had built for himself and two acres a short distance away. On these four acres we grew wheat, barley, potatoes, and other vegetables. We kept a number of pigs and a large number of fowls. For myself I had a fancy for rabbits, guinea-pigs, hedgehogs, and ferrets. We grew each year sufficient wheat to supply the family with bread. The wheat was ground in a mill, which still exists adjoining the parish of Withycombe.

My mother sifted the meal, separating only the coarse bran, which was given to the pigs. The rest she made into flat loaves of bread, which were baked in the home oven. The bread made was not white, but it contained all the nourishing parts of the grain. From the land in question the family were supplied with food, with the exception of butcher-meat, groceries, and milk. The walls of the kitchen were hung round with hams and sides of bacon, all home-cured by my mother.

My father held the opinion that meat once a day was necessary for the family, especially for the growing children. Accordingly, every day for dinner at twelve o'clock there was a joint of meat, roasted before the fire or baked in the oven. In addition there were potatoes, other vegetables, and invariably a boiled suet-pudding with eggs in it, on the making of which my mother prided herself. This was a sound, substantial meal, and no doubt was a main cause of the health and bodily strength which the children enjoyed. We kept no servant.

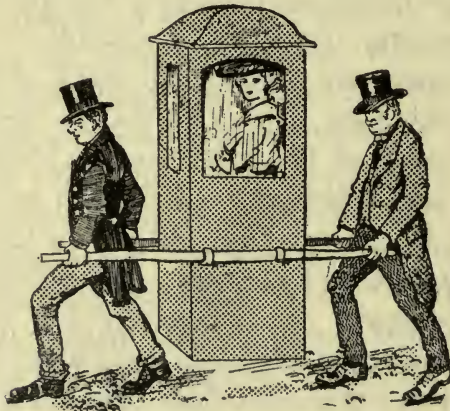
The only help my mother had was a woman who came one afternoon a week to do the washing, for which she received the small sum of sixpence and her food. My mother, who was never in bed after five o'clock in the morning, did the cooking, scrubbing, ironing, and all the work of the house, apart from the washing. This she did day after day without a holiday of any kind. She was assisted by the younger children—the elder ones being at work. The task apportioned to me was cleaning the knives and forks, blackleading the kitchen grate, washing the hearthstone, and helping to feed the pigs and fowls. I learnt to do many things connected with the land, to handle the plough, to use the scythe and reap-hook, and, in threshing time, to use the flail.

There were many old customs and occurrences, which have mostly disappeared and which are known only as traditions to the present generation. A horseshoe was nailed on every stable door to keep

out the witches. "Zadkiel's" and "Old Moore's" almanacs were accepted as real authorities on the weather; and, as to future events—"What does the almanac say?" was a common expression.

An idiot—"a natural," as he was called—was found in nearly every village, and was regarded as someone almost sacred.

Carriages were rare; the means of local travelling, especially by ladies, being by the old sedan chair



LOCAL TRAVELLING : SEDAN CHAIR

carried by two men. For longer distances the carrier's cart and the stage coach were commonly used.

Among the old customs that have mostly disappeared was the custom of "beating the bounds." The boundaries of parishes were not accurately defined in maps, so once a year the boys of the parish, accompanied by a few old men who knew the boundaries, went out to "beat the bounds."

We looked forward to and greatly enjoyed these perambulations, which were carried on over hedges, through streams, and other difficult places. The object was to teach the boys the boundaries of the parish, so that, when they grew old, they might, in the same manner, instruct the children of their day.

The amusements of most grown-up people were, for the most part, coarse and brutal. They consisted mainly of prize-fighting, dog-fighting, and cock-fighting. The sports of the boys, however, were very numerous and very healthful. In the summer-time we bathed in the sea once and often twice a day, and became expert swimmers. Another form of sport which the lads indulged in was that of wrestling, which at that time was much in vogue in Devon and Cornwall. The game was carried on in a very simple manner. The boys formed a ring, into which one of them threw his cap; another boy then threw in his cap, and the two began the contest. The winner engaged a fresh boy, and so on till the last winner was declared the champion of the day. There was no umpire to see fair play, but all was left to the honour of the lads.

On Christmas Eve and Christmas Day there were great festivities. In the great houses the Yule log was burnt; and, in the cottages, the ashen faggot—consisting of a bundle of dried ash sticks—was burnt. Fun and jollity prevailed, and we were regaled with hot spiced cider, the taste of which I

can realise even at the present day. It was the only occasion on which the children were allowed to sit up till midnight.

During the evening apples were placed in a tub of water, into which the boys, individually, ducked their heads to try to secure one. There were cakes, covered with treacle, tied to the end of a string, which was hung—and was caused to swing—from the ceiling. The youngsters, with their hands tied behind them, amidst roars of laughter, tried to catch the cakes in their mouths. The mistletoe, of course, was hung from the ceiling; under which, if the maidens strayed—inadvertently or intentionally—they were then and there kissed by the lads.

During the summer, dancing on the green constantly took place. The old, graceful, stately “country dances” were then in vogue; which all the villagers learnt at an early age.

The first of May was also a festive time. In the village a Maypole was erected, from which were suspended ropes of flowers, which were held by the lads and lassies, who gracefully danced around the pole. A May queen was chosen who was placed in a chair and carried through the street, accompanied by the village band of music.

The enjoyable event was the village fair, for which we saved our pence, and spent them at shows of various kinds. There were booths containing fat women, skeleton men, conjurors, and “sword swallows.” On a stage outside the booths were

men and drums and fifes, and women in tawdry dresses and tights, inviting the people to “step up” as “the performance was about to begin.” There was also the inevitable quack doctor, standing on a cart and delivering wonderful orations, showing that his pills were a certain remedy for coughs, colds, and all other ailments, and were “only one shilling a box.”

One notable feature in the village life of the time was the admirable manner in which the girls were taught to use the needle, and trained in the art of lace-making. The ambition of each girl was to produce what was called “a sampler.” A “sampler” was a piece of cloth on which designs, copied usually from natural objects, were worked by the needle. Some of these were very beautiful. In the poorest cottages these “samplers” were seen hung on the walls, usually in rough wooden frames.

## CHAPTER IV

### PRICE OF FOOD IN MY BOYHOOD

WHILE the children of all classes had undoubtedly a happy time, the lot of those parents who belonged to the labouring class was a hard one. The agricultural labourer worked long hours and received eight shillings a week, or sometimes less. The rent of his cottage was, fortunately, very low, and there was usually a garden attached to it, in which he grew vegetables. He also, as a rule, kept a pig. By these means he eked out his starvation wages.

The prices of nearly all the articles of food, however, were extremely low. Tea and other groceries were dear. Boots—an important item—were expensive, but were very good. The heels had iron “scutes,” the toes being tipped with iron plates. These boots were called “everlastings.” I do not remember wearing out a pair of boots; they were thrown aside and given away only when they became too small for the feet.

During the election after the question of Tariff Reform had been first brought to the front, books were written in the interest of so-called Free Trade, and were widely circulated to influence the electors.





THE COTTAGE AT LITTLEHAM WHERE MR. COLLINGS'  
FATHER AND MOTHER LIVED

*(See pages 7, 9, and 10).*



The people were asked if they wished to see a return of the high prices of food which prevailed in what was called the "hungry forties." It was stated that bread was 9d. to 1s. per loaf, that meat was an exorbitant price, and that it was only after the repeal of the Corn Laws that prices went down.

In the face of the facts of the case, as I knew them, these political writers are convicted either of considerable ignorance or deliberate misrepresentation. During the "hungry forties" the average price of bread was 7 $\frac{3}{4}$ d. per loaf, which at that time weighed 4 lb. 5 oz.; while, in 1846, the year in which the repeal of the Corn Laws was passed, the average price of bread was 5d. per loaf. For forty years after the repeal of the Corn Laws the price of bread was considerably higher, and the loaf weighed only 4 lb.

During the "hungry forties" eggs were sold twenty for a shilling; and, in summer-time, I knew them to be sold twenty-five and thirty for a shilling. We sold chickens and fowls from 1s. to 1s. 4d. each. During the same period beef, mutton, and pork averaged from 5d. to 6d. a lb.; and I remember that when it rose to 8d. my mother bought less than the usual quantity, and made up the deficiency with lard and dripping.

Milk was very cheap. I was accustomed to go at six o'clock in the morning to a neighbouring farm, with a pitcher holding quite three pints, which was filled with good skim (not separated) milk, and for

which milk I paid one penny. In fact, milk and eggs were the cheapest articles of food, and a great boon to children, who, in later years, had a milkless diet.

When Mr. Villiers in 1843 moved his resolution for the repeal of the Corn Laws, Mr. Gladstone opposed the motion on the ground that food was cheaper then than in any other year of that generation.

So far I have spoken of my own knowledge and experience of the alleged "hungry forties." Being the youngest of the family, I was the errand-boy, and was constantly sent to buy and pay for the articles I have named.

There is, however, striking evidence of the misery and destitution of the labouring class which followed the repeal of the Corn Laws. Cobden himself, nine years after the repeal, described the condition of the labourers in a letter to Mr. Ashworth, quoted in Morley's *Life of Gladstone*. "I never saw," he wrote, "more distress among this class. They are generally employed, but their wages never exceed 12s. a week and are often 10s. The labourer's wife and three or four children live on that sum with bread at 10d. the loaf (just twice the price it was in 1846). Dry bread is all they can get. The pigs have disappeared from the sties. The labourers and their children are looking haggard, pale, and ragged."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Those who wish to do so can verify the foregoing statements by collateral evidence. The books of the Hospital of St. Thomas, London, for example, show that in 1840-49—the period of the so-

## CHAPTER V

### AN EPOCH IN LIFE

IN 1845, when I was fourteen years old, an event happened which was an epoch in my life. Mr. Cluness, who, as I have said, had married my cousin Charlotte, and had opened a school of his own at Stoke, near Devonport, wrote to my father and offered to take me into his school for two terms of six months each. My father and mother, at first, were unwilling to accept this offer, as they did not wish me to leave home. Seeing, however, that it would be for my good, and that I would thus receive a better education than they could give me—which would be to my advantage in the future—they at last consented. My carpenter brother made a small box for my clothes (which I still have), and I was ready to start. My father took me in a carrier's cart (ten miles) to Exeter, and he saw me off by the stage coach for Devonport (forty-five miles).

We both felt sad at parting, and I well remember called "hungry forties"—the average prices paid for butcher's meat were 3s. 4d. for beef, and 3s. 10d. for mutton, per stone of eight pounds. See also *Reports of the Board of Trade, Statistical Abstracts of the United Kingdom, Tooke's History of Prices*, and other publications of the time.

the quiver in my father's voice as he said : " Good-bye ; God bless you, my boy." He gave me a shilling for pocket-money, and stood waving his hand till the coach was out of sight.

The route to Devonport lies through a beautiful country over the Haldon Hills, which commanded magnificent views, and along the edge of Dartmoor. The stopping to change horses, the talk of the passengers, the splendid views, and other incidents of this my first journey from home fully occupied my mind and relieved the sadness of parting from my mother and father.

Mr. Cluness met me at Devonport, and took me to Stoke. The schoolhouse was a large building, which accommodated about fifty pupils (boarders and day-boys). The pupils were the sons of gentlemen, mostly of the Army and Navy, and of a class altogether different from that with which I had been accustomed to associate. At first they made fun of my broad Devonshire dialect—so broad that they found it difficult to understand a good deal of it. My ill-fitting, rustic clothes were a subject of their mock-admiration, as well as my manners at table. These things made me so unhappy that for the first few weeks I sickened for home, and remember crying myself to sleep every night. I have had through life, however, a great faculty for making friends ; and, in a short time, my fellow-scholars ceased their jokes and mimicry and became quite friendly. The bedrooms contained six or eight small beds each ;

and, as I had a gift of story-telling, I used to entertain the boys with stories of various kinds. Lads from the other bedrooms, in defiance of rules, used to come into my room to listen to the stories. I remember, on one occasion, I told them a ghost story ; and one poor lad was, as a consequence, too frightened to return to his own room, and begged to remain with us for the night—which he did.

The course of instruction included the classics, English, and modern languages. We had a Frenchman to teach us French, and I soon became charmed with the beauty and smoothness of that language. I continued the study of it after I left school, and ultimately became able to write and speak the language fairly well. In Latin, I got far enough to be able to read Virgil by the aid of a dictionary, but did not continue the study of that language after I left school.

Fortunately, the postage of letters was cheap ; as Sir Rowland Hill's scheme for a universal penny rate was passed into law three or four years before I was at school. Before that time, letters were charged at different rates up to one shilling, according to distance and weight. This reform enabled my mother to write me a letter every week ; under the large wax seal of which was enclosed a sixpence for pocket-money.

My father, seeing, no doubt, from my letters that I was very home-sick, came down to see me at mid-term. He stayed three days, and his visit made me

very happy. I saw him off at Devonport by the stage coach, and I remember his affectionate emotion on again saying "Good-bye." As the coach was starting, he threw down on the pavement a few pennies as a parting gift. I felt very lonely after he was gone.

One notable effect of my sojourn at this school was that, through intercourse and speech with gentlemen's sons there, I completely lost my broad Devonshire dialect. "How be 'ee?" then became "How are you?" "Sodger" became "soldier"; "vather and muther" became "father and mother"; "tu, dree, vower, vive," became "two, three, four, five"; "tuppance, dreppance, vowerpance," became "twopence, threepence, fourpence," and so on.

This year's schooling and its associations were of the greatest importance to me afterwards. Besides improving my education, my manners and bearing were altered, and I received both a fresh view of life and a wider acquaintance with people.



## CHAPTER VI

### AT WORK: AN INCIDENT WHICH HAD RESULTS

MY eldest sister married a journeyman tin-plate worker named Plimsoll. After his marriage he began business for himself, as a maker of tin wares. Eventually, with the assistance of my father, he added general ironmongery to his tin trade. My sister showed great capacity as a business woman. She took full charge of the shop, while her husband worked at the tin trade. Mainly by her efforts, the business developed and became very successful.

In 1846, when I was fifteen years old, after leaving the school at Stoke, I went every day to assist my sister in the shop ; for which I received one shilling a week, which, after some months, was raised to five shillings a week.

The ironmongery goods were bought from a Birmingham firm, namely, that of Messrs. Samuel Booth & Co. Mr. Booth, the head of the firm, visited Exmouth every six months, and took orders from samples which he carried about in a carriage drawn by one horse. I assisted at my sister's shop in preparing the orders which were given to him.

Incidentally, I told him how much I should like to be employed in a wholesale firm ; which he promised to bear in mind. I mention these details, as they—like the going to Mr. Cluness' school—had an important bearing on my subsequent career ; as will be seen later on.

During the three years I was at Mr. Plimsoll's, my passion for reading increased, and I read all the books I could get. In the corner of one of my father's fields at Littleham was a pollarded elm tree ; and every morning, at five o'clock, in both the spring- and summer-time, I ascended this tree and read till breakfast-time. Absorbed in a book, the smell of mother-earth, the litany of the song-birds, the clatter of the whetstone as the mower sharpened his scythe, and other country sounds, made this one of the happiest times of my life.

Among the books I read were two odd volumes of Isaac Barrow's sermons. I mention them because they influenced my opinions, and opened up new views of life's problems. The sermons were very prosy, and for the most part uninteresting ; but among them were what seemed to me gems of thought. I made extracts from them, which extracts are now before me : " What are money and lands ? What are silks and fine linen ? What are horses and hounds in comparison with reason ? . . . In fine, this poor creature whom thou seest is a man and thine equal, whomsoever thou art ; in nature thy peer. I say not in the uncertain and un-

stable gifts of fortune, but in gifts really more precious in title to an estate, more rich and excellent. . . . That distinction which thou standest upon, which seemeth so vast between thee and thy poor neighbours, whence did it come? It is not natural or according to primitive design. . . . The two pestilent words *meum et teum*, have caused so much strife in the world. . . . Thus hath God wisely projected that all His children should effectually be provided for; and none of them be oppressed with penury so that, as St. Paul hath it, one man's abundance shall supply another man's want. No man can enjoy more than he needs, and every man should have as much as he needs."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Isaac Barrow was Master of Trinity College, Cambridge, in 1672. Sir Isaac Newton was one of his pupils. His sermons were of inordinate length. It is recorded that at Westminster Abbey, after preaching three and a half hours, the organ was played to "blow him down."

Some years ago I visited Trinity Hall to see Isaac Barrow's portrait. I pointed it out to several undergraduates, who had never noticed it. When I explained to them how great a man he was, one of them turned on his heel and said: "We shall think something of the old boy in future."

One cannot help reflecting that if the portrait had been of some classic celebrity, the undergraduates would have been taught all about him, but being only that of a distinguished Englishman, the College authorities thought it not worth while to teach them about him.

## CHAPTER VII

### DEVON TO LONDON: FATHER'S DECEASE

AFTER three years' service I grew dissatisfied with my position at Mr. Plimsoll's, and decided to take some steps to better myself. My second sister Anne had married a man named Howe, a native of Exmouth, who was in business in London as a bath-maker and japanner, and was doing fairly well. I decided to visit them, and to try to get a situation in London. For myself, I had contradictory feelings. I knew, when gone, that I should yearn for home, but was resolved to go. I had enough money in the savings bank at Exeter to pay my fare, so at the age of seventeen I started for London and stayed with my sister. The house was a very small one, and I had to sleep on the sofa every night.

Day after day I walked about London, and called on ironmongers to try to get a situation, but I returned every evening disappointed and unsuccessful. In most cases, I was told that I was too young and inexperienced.

However, I called on an Exmouth man, who was a grocer's assistant in London, and he gave me some good advice. He took away the walking-stick

which I had been using, and advised me to get some better clothes (as those I wore were ill-fitting and countrified), and especially to discard my corduroy trousers. No doubt he was right ; as my clothes were cut and made by the village tailor, hired by the day. I did not, however, lose heart, but continued my quest for a situation. At last, through an agent in the city, I was engaged by a firm in Southampton at a salary of £25 a year.

This firm were the forerunners of the "Stores" system. They were ironmongers, stationers, grocers, drapers, and haberdashers. I was placed in the ironmongery and stationery departments. There were about twenty assistants, who I soon found out were an unsteady lot. The firm had the reputation of being severe and strict, and were, it was said, consequently unable to secure the best kind of assistants. The work was certainly very hard and the working hours were long, namely, from 7 o'clock in the morning, winter and summer, till 8.30 and often 9 at night. One hour was allowed for dinner, half an hour for breakfast, and the same for tea. These long hours, standing and serving customers all the time (the shop being always crowded), told on my health, and gave me such constant backaches that I felt at times I must give up the place. I struggled on, however, as £25 a year was not lightly to be given up. By means of a belt tightly laced round the waist, the back trouble was eased.

We had a number of customers from the Channel

Islands; most of whom could not speak English. It was discovered by my employers that I had a fair knowledge of the French language, and I was therefore told off to serve these Channel Islands customers. I was rapidly improving my knowledge of the ironmongery trade.

On August 9, 1849, I received my first quarter's salary, £6 5s., and thought it very good. Having left home very poorly clad, I spent this amount in buying new clothes; and, for the first time in my life, I then possessed an overcoat.

My fellow-assistants in the shop were very irregular in their habits, and spent too much of their money in alcoholic drink. They were, however, not bad fellows, and I got on very well with them. I used to write short simple essays on temperance and other subjects, which I read to them at night when they returned home. They listened to them with much attention, thought them very good, and kept them after they had been read.

There was one peculiarity about the feeding arrangements of the establishment. We had roast legs of mutton every day for dinner, and during my whole stay we had no other joint. None of us could suggest a reason for this, except that of economy, by making cheap contracts with the butcher.

At the end of six months my salary was increased from £25 to £30 a year. This was very welcome, not only on account of the money but also as a sign that I was giving satisfaction to my employers. I

sent a present of a dress to my mother, and of some stockings to my father.

My mother wrote (December 27th, 1849), as follows :

“ DEAR CHILD,—The hamper came to hand this evening. Father and myself are very proud of the presents you send. Father, I am sorry to say, is very unwell, etc.”

A few weeks later my father wrote me a letter. Among other things, he said :

“ I hope you are a good boy. I want to nawe where your prizes is what you got at schole, becace I will have them glassed and framed and hanged up at hum (home). I want to zee 'e very bad. God bless 'e [I want to see you very badly ; God bless you].

“ from your luving vather,

“ THOMAS COLLINGS.”

My father had expressed his intention of coming to Southampton to see me ; but letters from home gave very bad accounts of his health, and I was at last told that he was too ill to come. A subsequent letter told me that he was much worse, and that he expressed a strong wish to see me. I spoke to my employers about my father's condition, and they consented to my leaving at once.

Most of my fellow-shopmen, as I have said, were very unsteady and had irregular habits ; but they were the first grown-up men I had been thrown

amongst, and, with all their faults, I recognised the good qualities they possessed, and I learned to like them. They gave me a farewell supper at a cook-shop before I left for home.

This was one of the occasions on which I made notes (now before me) of what happened. After supper speeches were made, and the men, in feeling terms, expressed their regret at my leaving, and especially for the cause of my going. They hoped that I should return, as they had never worked with a better shopmate, etc. I was much touched with their sympathy, and, in my reply, I thanked them for all the kind words they had spoken. I suppose I spoke with some warmth, for during my speech I noticed tears in the eyes of many of them. Altogether, it was a very human scene. We then shook hands together, said farewell, and parted.

I left by the midnight train for Dorchester; thence at 3 a.m. by mail coach for Exeter, where I arrived at noon the same day, and got to Exmouth at four o'clock in the afternoon. I found my dear father on his death-bed, but quite conscious. He kissed me and held my hand and blessed me, and said how glad he was that I had come. He looked so changed and ill that I was heart-broken to see him. I spent almost every minute with him night and day, as I found it a great comfort to wait on him. He was very calm, collected, and patient, and thought of everyone but himself. He spoke especially of our future, and urged that we should stand



cordially together, as we should then do well, but if we were divided we should not.

On May 28th, 1850, at 7.30 in the evening, the best of fathers passed peacefully away. All the family were present, except my sailor brother, who was at sea.

I draw a veil over the agony of my poor mother as we led her out of the chamber, where lay her loved husband, who had been her partner in life for so many years. For myself, I felt dazed at the thought that he who had loved me so dearly as his favourite child, was gone from us, and that we should never hear his voice again. It was the heaviest blow of my life, and as I realised the bereavement, I seemed suddenly to cross the dividing line between youth and manhood.

## CHAPTER VIII

### OFF TO BIRMINGHAM: EARLY DAYS THERE

1850. My father was buried in the parish church-yard at Littleham. A large number of persons attended the funeral to show their respect for his memory. The only property my father had was in the business, which was left to my brothers, subject to an annual sum to be paid to my mother for her maintenance. The sum was not large, but sufficient for her modest requirements.

A week or so before my father's death I received a letter from Mr. Booth, of the firm (previously referred to) of Samuel Booth & Co., Merchants, Birmingham; in which he said: "You may remember that on one occasion when I saw you at Exmouth you expressed a wish to go into a wholesale house.<sup>1</sup> I now write to offer you a junior clerk's place in our warehouse. We cannot offer you a large salary, as it will be some time before you become useful to us. We can offer you £60 for the first year, with a progressive advance according to merit, and that your advance will be rapid I have every reason to believe from the opportunities I have had of observing you."

<sup>1</sup> See Chapter VI.

I showed this letter to my father, who was much pleased with it; but I told him that I should on no account leave him while he was so ill. He then wished me to write to Mr. Booth and ask him if he could wait for a few days. This I did. Mr. Booth replied, expressing regret at my father's condition, and saying that he would wait till I was at liberty.

When my father's affairs were settled, the family and I thought it to be my duty to go to Birmingham as soon as possible. Accordingly, on June 28th, 1850, when nineteen years old, I left home for Birmingham. The parting from my mother, so soon after my father's death, was a sad one.

On my arrival in Birmingham, I told the cabman to drive me to a cheap public-house, as near as possible to Steelhouse Lane, where Messrs. Booths' warehouse was situated. He drove me to the "Swan With Two Necks" in Aston Street—then a small inn, since rebuilt and enlarged—where I stayed the night. I went into the smoking-room, where a number of Birmingham workmen were smoking and drinking. I felt very strange among them. I had supper, which consisted of bread and cheese and a glass of beer, and then went to bed, tired with my day's journey. In the morning I went to the warehouse, and was introduced to the manager and the clerks. Besides the clerks there were four young apprentices, who received me very kindly, and with whom I soon became friendly. One of them took me to Handsworth, about two

miles off, and helped me to secure, in a small house, a bedroom at a low price.

My first impressions of Birmingham were the bigness of the place, the crowded streets, the hurry-scurry of the people passing along them—all so different from the state of things in the quiet country place in Devonshire from which I had come. The prospect, however, of £60 a year made me feel rich for the only time in my life. The one difficulty I had was how to exist for the three months before my first quarter's salary became due. I had been accustomed to keep an income and expenditure account of the very small sums at my disposal. It is a practice I would recommend to all young men, as it is a safeguard against extravagance. On reference to that account, I find that on starting from home I borrowed £10 from my brothers. In addition to this I had £3 5s. in the Exeter savings bank, which at my request was remitted in the form of a draft on a Birmingham bank.<sup>1</sup>

After paying my fare to Birmingham, and expenses at the inn, etc., I found that I had just £8 left to carry me over the three months before my first quarter's salary became due. I find, from my

<sup>1</sup> An amusing incident occurred when I went to the bank to cash the draft, which showed a lack of Biblical knowledge on the part of the cashier. When I handed the draft to him, he looked around and said, "Jesse Collings, where is she?" I modestly replied, "Here she is, sir!" There was a titter of amusement among those at the counter waiting to be served, and the cashier himself was much confused.

expenditure account, that I managed to live during the three months on 13s. a week all told. This left me at the end of the quarter with a few shillings in hand, and was only accomplished by the greatest economy. Next door to the warehouse was a small cook-shop, where I had my dinner every day, at a cost of 7d. I had tea and bread and butter for supper at my lodgings. On receipt of my quarter's salary things became much easier, and I was enabled to save.

My work at Messrs. Booths' was at first very unimportant. It consisted mainly of copying orders from the order-sheets which the travellers sent home from their respective journeys, but I took care that it should be done well and correctly. I stayed late, often till nine o'clock, to finish any work I happened to have in hand.

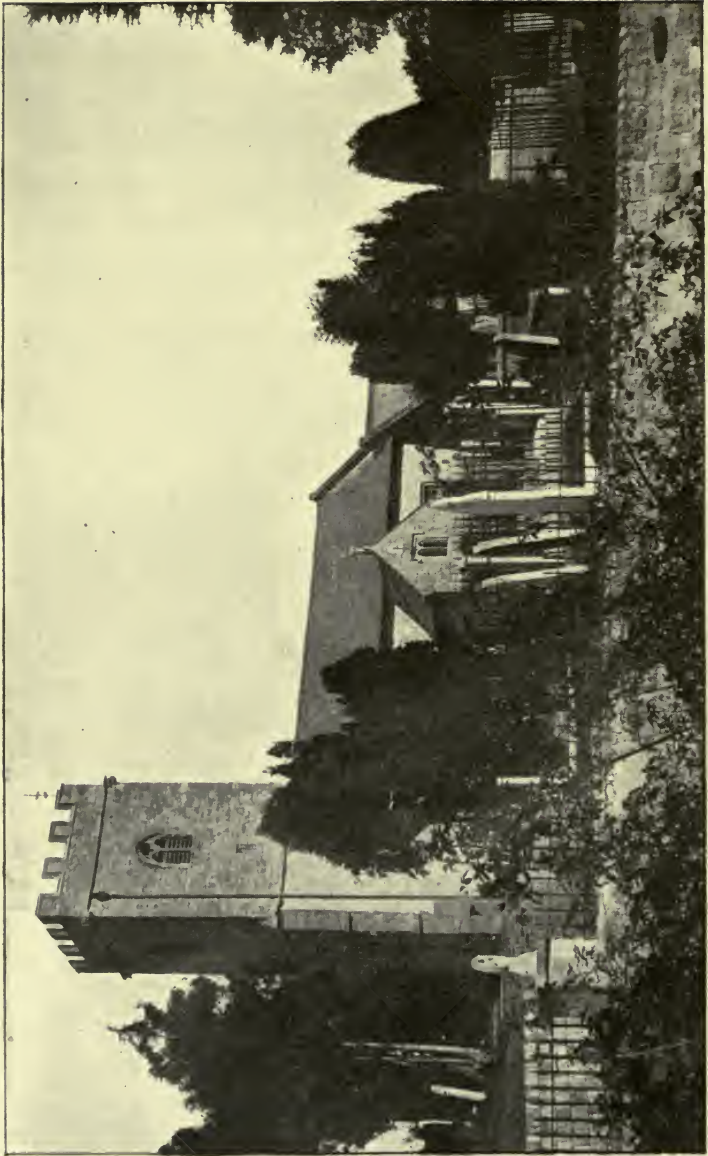
In walking to my lodgings at night through the crowded streets, I felt very lonely—a loneliness which can only be felt in a large city with no close friends to speak to.

My great resource was reading. I found that books were true friends, giving much and asking little. With them one could travel all over the world, could visit every land, become familiar with different peoples, and hold communion with the noblest men and women everywhere. Reading and employment—occupation both of body and mind—are the two great safeguards against the evils which exist in a large city. On my return from business,

however late, I always read till one or two o'clock in the morning. It was my habit to keep two books going at the same time ; one a novel, and the other a more " solid " book. Of the latter I was a very slow reader, as it was my custom to make copious extracts of the main points from the book I was reading. These extracts formed a condensation of the work itself. This is a practice I would also strongly recommend to any young student ; for at any later time a perusal of these extracts would recall the whole substance of the books to which they referred.

I kept a list (now before me) of the books I read during several years. In it I find Smollett's *Roderick Random* and *Humphrey Clinker* ; Fielding's *Tom Jones*, and other works ; Dickens' *Pickwick*, *David Copperfield*, and *Bleak House*, which last was then appearing in monthly parts ; Sir Walter Scott's novels ; the works *Don Quixote* and *Gil Blas* ; Hallam's *Constitutional History* and *State of Europe During the Middle Ages*. In the list, I also find a number of French novels and other French literature, including the works of Renan, Bossuet, and Fénelon. I studied closely, and made many extracts from, Carlyle's *Past and Present*, *Sartor Resartus*, and the thrilling book *The French Revolution*. I followed the same course with *Plutarch's Lives*, especially the lives of the two Gracchi, from which I first learnt particulars of the land tenure in Rome, and of the " Latifundia " (large estates), which caused the





LITTLEHAM PARISH CHURCH

(See page 11)



ruin of that great empire. I find a note to the effect that the "Latifundia" which exist in England would have the same baleful effect on agriculture in this country. In the list, too, I observe Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, John Stuart Mill's *System of Logic and Essays on Political Economy*; and Gibbons' *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*—a monumental work, from which I made scores of pages of extracts.

I had always on my table a volume of Omar Khayyám, which I read and re-read at intervals. I learnt one special lesson from him, namely, well to consider a step before it is taken, and that a deed once done cannot be recalled :

"The moving finger writes, and having writ moves on,  
Nor all your piety, nor wit can lure it back again, to cancel  
Half a line ; nor all your tears wipe out a word of it."

Among the books of poetry, I was a close reader of Robert Burns—a master of song, describing the joys, sorrows, and feelings of those who labour for their daily bread. His "Address to the Unco' Guid" is one of the greatest incentives to human charity that was ever written.

## CHAPTER IX

### LETTERS FROM AND A VISIT TO HOME

1850. My mother wrote to me once a week and told me the affairs of the family at home. She felt deeply my father's recent death, but was bearing up bravely. I also wrote her once a week, and sometimes oftener, as she said: "I am very lonely, my dear boy, and your letters are a great comfort to me, and I look for the postman every day."

She occasionally sent me a hamper of home-cured bacon, and a can of Devonshire cream, which, she stated, "will come handy, as you have to buy everything. God bless you, my dear child, and send you all the comforts of this life." I did my best to induce my mother to come to Birmingham, to live with me, but without effect. She pleaded that she was too old and infirm.

Before autumn I took advantage of the fortnight's holiday which the firm allowed annually to each of the clerks, to visit Exmouth. My mother was delighted to see me, and we spent a very happy time together. I took long walks and rides for miles around Exmouth.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> In one of my walks I saw a young man ploughing with two horses. I entered the field, and with an air of authority I took the plough out of his hands and told him to drive the horses. I ploughed

Each place I visited had its little history, and awoke memories and associations which had become latent. I seemed to live over again my early days with their pleasures and troubles. I visited the churchyard at Littleham, where my father lay asleep, and recalled his love for me. I rode over the moorland to Budleigh Salterton, then on to Sidmouth with its rocky cliffs overlooking the sea; thence across the common to Budleigh, and went into the old church, which Sir Walter Raleigh and other Elizabethan heroes attended; thence on to Hayes Barton, where Sir Walter was born, and the lands around which he cultivated. In the distance was the river Exe, winding among fertile meadows, with their herds of the Red Devon cattle. Beyond the river, stretching out as far as the eye could reach, were the highlands of Haldon and Dartmoor.

After my experience of smoky Birmingham and the adjoining "Black Country," I realised to the full the enchanting beauties of my native county, wrapped in all its splendour. It was from Devon that the sea heroes of Queen Elizabeth's time principally came: the Hawkins' family from Plymouth—William Hawkins and his great sons, Sir William and Sir Richard Hawkins; Sir Walter Raleigh, and his half-brother Sir Humphrey Gilbert; John Davis, the Arctic explorer; and Sir Francis one furrow across the field and found that that was enough. I said to the lad, "I fear the furrow is not very straight." He replied, "I've zeen 'em striter, zur." I gave him a shilling, and left him standing watching me, no doubt wondering who I was.

Drake, who, in his tiny ship, captured the Spanish galleons laden with treasure, and was called "the master thief of the unknown world." These were the men who attacked and destroyed the great Spanish Armada. The story of Sir Richard Grenville's exploit off the Azores is a thrilling one. In his small ship *The Revenge* he fought alone a whole Spanish fleet. His ship was at length destroyed, and he himself, mortally wounded, was taken on board one of the Spanish ships to die, thanking Heaven with his latest breath that he died "fighting for his Queen, his religion, and his honour"; and one is stirred by the touching lines of Tennyson, in which he describes this wonderful exhibition of courage and endurance :

"And the sun went down, and the stars came out far over the  
summer sea,  
But never a moment ceased the fight of the one, and the fifty-  
three.  
Ship after ship, the whole night long, their high built galleons  
came.  
Ship after ship, the whole night long, with her battle thunder  
and flame.  
Ship after ship, the whole night long, drew back with her dead  
and her shame.  
For some were sunk and many were shattered and so could  
fight no more ;  
God of battles ! Was ever a battle like this in the world be-  
fore." <sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Some years later I visited the Azores, and the scene of this audacious exp'oit.

## CHAPTER X

### BACK TO BIRMINGHAM: ILLNESS, A VOYAGE AND SHIPWRECK

1850. On my return to Birmingham, I went into fresh lodgings, in which I had a bedroom and sitting-room to myself. I found this far more comfortable, though more expensive, than sharing a sitting-room with a family. I could keep my books and papers on the table and pursue my studies without interruption. I joined the Mechanics' Institute, and attended the weekly lectures given there. Among others I heard Professor Huxley lecture, which was a great treat. He was a small man with an animated face and piercing eyes. He lectured without any notes and only with a large blackboard and a piece of chalk; but he completely held the attention of his audience.

In October I attended a great meeting in the Birmingham Town Hall, and heard speeches from Cobden and Bright. Cobden's speech was cool and entirely argumentative, and at the same time convincing. Bright's speech was one of impassioned eloquence, which enthralled the audience.

In November I attended a crowded meeting in the

Town Hall, and heard a speech from the Hungarian patriot Kossutt. He made a long and eloquent oration, in almost perfect English. Some parts of it were of a bold and heroic nature, others were pathetic and touching. "You speak," he said, "of my inspiring my people, but it was they who inspired me."

1851. Time, "the thief of youth," on January 9th, brought me to my twentieth birthday. My mother sent me, as a birthday present, a hamper of home-cured bacon, and with it she wrote me a loving letter, which concluded as follows: "May the Lord in His mercy grant you every blessing in life, and keep you from every harm."

In September my sister invited me to go to London, to see the great Exhibition then open. I went by a cheap excursion train, and remained three days. Sir Josh. Paxton's huge glass building, in which the Exhibition was held, and the wonderful collection it contained, impressed me very much.

As regards business, my progress was very satisfactory. My salary was increased from £60 to £70. Mr. Booth, the head of the firm, was getting more and more friendly towards me, and expressed his satisfaction at the way I was doing my work. He himself was a bachelor, living with his brother, who had a wife and children. Almost every Sunday I was invited to dine and spend the afternoon with them, and was received most cordially by all the family.

1853-4. This year I had a great advance in my position in the business. Mr. Booth, who was on his "journey," wrote me to say that the traveller who represented the firm in London had arranged to leave for Canada, and that he had decided to offer me the post. "As a first journey," he wrote, "it will be an arduous undertaking, but, with your application and industry, I am confident that you will ultimately succeed. The salary is £100 a year, with an adequate allowance for expenses." I gladly accepted the situation, and after a few weeks' preparation I started for London as a commercial traveller, being then twenty-two years old. I gave my whole time and thought to the work, and at the end of the first journey it was found that the sales I had effected considerably exceeded those of my predecessor during a similar period.

After one year's travelling in London, there was another change. Mr. Booth, who had been "on the road" for many years, had been for some time desirous of giving over travelling and of remaining at home to manage the increasing business of the firm. He wrote asking me to meet him at Taunton, which I did. He then and there told me that he had decided that I should continue the journey for a time, and do the best I could. The firm had six travellers; but his journey, which comprised the Midlands and the South and West of England, was the mainstay of the business. He handed me over the keys of numerous boxes of

patterns, of the contents of which I was quite ignorant, and left me, as he said, "to do the best I could," and returned to Birmingham. The method of travelling was a carriage—in which the boxes were packed—drawn by a pair of horses. In these unfavourable circumstances I continued the journey. I soon, however, "found my feet"; and the orders I sent home were equal to or larger than he had been accustomed to send. He wrote and congratulated me on my success, and said that he should hand over the journey to me permanently.

Unfortunately, after a few months' hard work, I completely broke down in health, and had to leave the journey. Though hardly able to walk, I went to Bristol to see a doctor. Besides medicine, he gave me a black respirator to wear over the mouth. This seemed to indicate that he thought I was in consumption. I felt no alarm at that, as I knew that none of the family had ever suffered from that disease. The doctor advised me strongly to take a sea voyage, and said it was the very best means to restore my health. My brother Henry at that time was in command of a brigantine, *The Diadem*, a vessel of 300 tons. She was then lying in the Mersey, ready for sea. I wrote to my brother telling him about my illness, and of the doctor's advice. He replied immediately, saying that he was sure a sea voyage would set me up, but that I must come at once, as he was ready for sea and only detained by adverse gales.



Accordingly, I made arrangements to start without delay. In the meantime, I had most kind letters from Mr. Booth. "I hope," he wrote, "that you will consider yourself in our service, and will continue to draw your salary as usual." I replied, thanking him for his kindness, but saying that I felt I could not draw the salary, seeing that I could no longer do the work. He then wrote me another letter by which I was greatly touched. "I think," he said, "we thoroughly understand one another. If necessary you will apply to me as friend to friend, and the appeal shall be met in a friendly and hearty manner. Do not feel that you are incurring an obligation. It is not one in this case. I trust that if you find some pleasure in our real appreciation of your sterling good qualities there is no less gratification to me in the belief that I have attached you to our interests by some higher and better relation than £ s. d. Therefore, my good fellow, get well as soon as you can, and come back to us. Do not let any false delicacy prevent you from applying to us for anything you require. If you recover, as I think and believe you will, the matter will not deserve a second thought from yourself, or from us. On the contrary, if you should 'go under,' why, we can balance accounts in the next world. Let me know, as I am anxious about it; and believe me, sincerely yours, Samuel Booth."

In November, therefore, when nearly twenty-three years old, I left Bristol for Liverpool by the

old wooden paddle steamer the *Troubadour*. The weather was so stormy, and I became so ill, that I had to be helped ashore at Milford Haven, where I remained a week or so, till the *Troubadour* arrived on her next journey, when I joined her, and again started for Liverpool. I remember to this day the incidents of this dreadful passage. A gale of head wind blew the whole of the time. I lay sick and ill on the cabin floor—the only safe place—drenched to the skin by the water, which came down the gangway and flooded the cabin. We arrived, however, safely, and my brother met me at the docks with a boat's crew, and he took us to his ship. When on board, he asked what was that "black thing" (the respirator) I wore over my mouth. When I told him its purpose, he said, "fresh air never did anyone any harm." The remark seemed to me a sensible one, and I took "the thing" off and never wore it again.

The ship had been wind-bound for some time. The captain made several attempts to sail, and on one occasion he went a long way down the Channel, but he was driven back to the Mersey again. I was much interested in the sailors, and became very friendly with them. I prepared coffee for those on the night watch, and went into the forecabin and told stories to the men who were off duty—stories about adventures at sea, to which they listened like children.

One of the sailors named Dalley was a married

man, who could neither read nor write. My brother was accustomed to write Dalley's letters home, and to read those he received. It struck me as a great hardship that Dalley could not write to those dearest to him, or receive letters from them without their contents being known to a third person. I proposed to Dalley, therefore, that I should teach him to read and write. He said he was too old to learn, but when I insisted on a trial he fell in with the proposal. Every day I gave him lessons in the fore-castle, when he was off duty. He was an apt pupil, and after a couple of months he wrote a letter to his wife with his own hand. He was delighted to find—he could hardly realise it—that he could write what he wished to say without its being seen by others.<sup>1</sup>

My health got rapidly better, and at the end of two months I was as well and strong as ever. This satisfied me that my breakdown was not caused by any disease, but by overwork. The long rest and sea air had quite set me up again.

1855. On the evening of March 11th the ship arrived

<sup>1</sup> As a sequel to this schooling, I received a few years later the following letter: "Mr. Collings, sir, I now take the liberty of writing these few lines returning you many thanks for the kindness I received from you when we were shipmates together on board the *Diadem* in 1854, which I feel very grateful for, as you are the only schoolmaster I ever had; and I think it is my duty to write and let you know how I am getting on. I have for some time been master of a ship called the *Devonshire Lass* of Exeter. I should be most happy to hear from you and beg to remain, sir, Yours obediently, Capt. Henry Dalley, Starcross, Devonshire." I wrote him a long and friendly letter in reply.

off the coast of Holland, where the captain expected to find a pilot, but unfortunately he could not get one. The Dutch pilot boats come many miles into the North Sea to meet incoming vessels. On this occasion we saw the last available pilot hauled by a rope from the pilot boat to a ship some distance ahead of us. The wind was blowing a hurricane. Our ship, however, was strong and well framed. My brother was himself at the wheel all night, and by skilful seamanship kept to the windward of the lee shore till daylight. About five o'clock in the morning I heard a strange grating sound under the cabin floor, which was followed by a succession of bumps. I went up the companion stairs that led up from the cabin, holding on by the rail, and I found that the ship had struck on the Vaster Bank, a large stretch of sand some miles off the Dutch coast.

It was a terrible time. The ship was at intervals floated by a wave, and when the wave receded she was dropped heavily on the ground, making her quiver from end to end, and causing the topmasts, yards and tackle to fall on the deck. This continued for some time until, as the sailors termed it, the ship "broke her back." She then lay like a log, the waves dashing over her and sweeping everything movable into the sea. She was fast becoming a wreck, and the captain, who was cool and collected throughout, ordered the ship's boat to be launched. Unfortunately the boat was slung

on the windward side, from which it was impossible to launch her. The captain then ordered the bulwarks on the leeward side to be cut down level with the deck. This was done by the sailors with hatchets in a short space of time, and the boat was launched and secured by ropes to the leeward side of the ship. We all managed to scramble in except the captain, who was wading through the water to reach the cabin, in order to secure the ship's papers. The sea was running very high, and it seemed inevitable that the boat would be swamped. The captain, on his return, took the tiller and, chewing the end of a cigar, managed to keep the bow of the boat to windward. She thus mounted each tall wave, then descended rapidly into a valley of green waters, and afterwards ascended the next wave.

This exciting time continued till five o'clock, i.e. for twelve hours after the ship had struck. We then sighted a lifeboat which belonged to the Dutch East India Company, who always sent out a lifeboat in very severe weather in case any of their ships should arrive. The lifeboat bore down alongside of our boat, and the crew, taking us by the hand, rapidly tumbled us on the deck, and cut our ship's boat adrift. The lifeboat drew very little water, and was thus enabled to go over the shoals and dangerous places. She had one sail, which was fixed, and when a heavy gust of wind came the boat rolled over on her side, and the sail lay flat on the water, the boat righting herself when the gust was

over. The crew were lashed to their posts on the deck, and we were huddled together inside, and the hatches closed down to keep out the water. I remember that the sensation was like being inside a rolling-pin. The lifeboat brought us into the small port of Brouwershaven, where we arrived about ten o'clock at night.

The captain went to the shipping agents, and the men wandered about the town. I went into a public-house, where, in a large room, a number of Dutchmen were drinking, smoking, playing cards, draughts, dominoes, and other games. I passed them, and sat down on the floor in the farthest corner of the room, and, being dead tired, I went fast asleep. When I awoke in the morning I found it difficult to make out where I was. The place was dark, with the exception of a little light which came through two round holes in the shutters. Presently, however, the servants came in and opened the shutters and doors, and it was evident that in closing the house on the previous night they had not seen me asleep in the corner. My clothes had dried on me during the night. I felt refreshed, but very hungry. I walked out of the house without being asked any question.

We all, with the exception of the captain, were sent on by the British Consul's agent by steamer to Rotterdam, where we lodged in a cheap boarding-house. The British Government, through the Consul, paid 16d. a day for shipwrecked sailors, so that

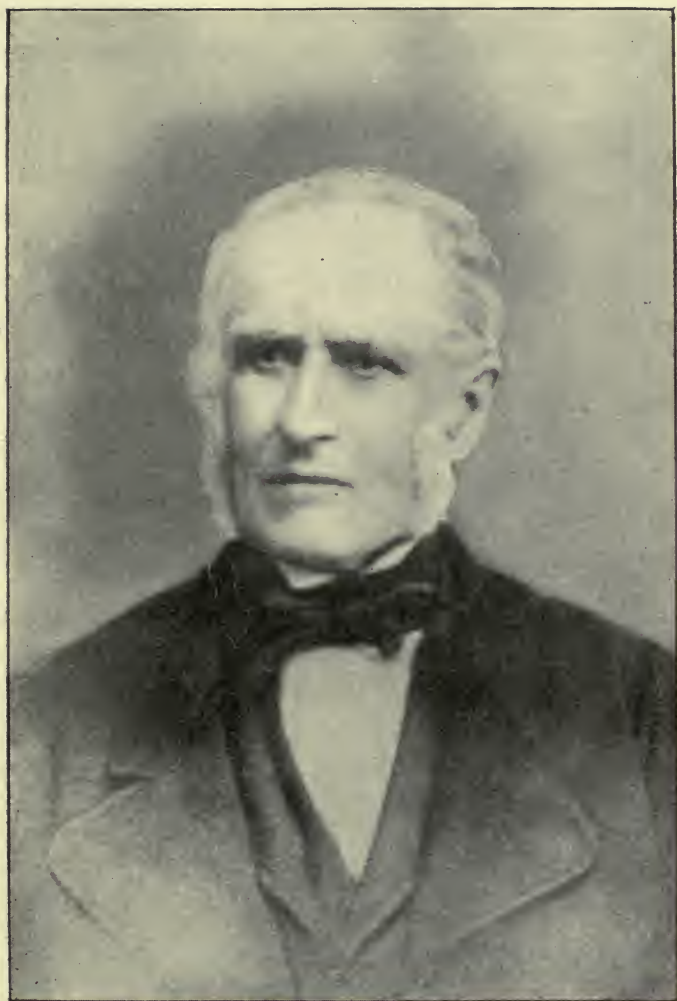
our fare and quarters were not very good. We and the ship's dog, which we had saved from the wreck, were put into a fairly large room, and managed as best we could, sleeping on the floor, or on chairs. I was told that, being a passenger and not a sailor, if I applied to the Consul I should be provided with better quarters ; but I thought it right to stick to the crew, as we had been together all through the dangers of the voyage.

We had to wait several days, loafing about, before the ship which was to take us to London was due to sail. I had given my address to the Post Office, Dordt, to which place the *Diadem* was chartered. I much wished to go there to get letters from home, but had no money for the journey. While walking on the quay I met a young Englishman, who proved to be a son of well-to-do parents at Budleigh Salterton, six miles from my native place. He had worked his way home from Australia, and, seeing my need, he urged me to accept some money from him. " If you do not," he said, " I shall only spend it, and practically throw it away." I at last accepted a gulden (20 pence in English money) and left by steamer, before breakfast, the next morning for Dordt. The return fare was one shilling, and I thought the remainder of the money would do to buy something to eat. I received several letters at the post office, but found that there was fourpence " extra postage " to pay on them. This left me with a few pence only, with which I bought a cigar and

a glass of wine, both these articles being very cheap in Holland. I got back to Rotterdam late at night. Supper being over, I had nothing to eat till the following morning, when I had been thirty-six hours without food.

The next day we were sent by the Consul to London by the steamer *Batavia*. On our arrival, a little difficulty arose with regard to our dog. The captain demanded 5s. for his fare, but none of us had any money. As we were all very fond of the dog, and loath to leave him behind, I gave the captain my watch, and told him that I would return in a few hours and pay him the 5s. The sailors remained on board till my return. I then walked to my sister's house, near Tottenham Court Road, and borrowed some money. I presented a disreputable appearance. I wore a "Sou-wester" cap and a sailor's blue jersey. My hair and beard had grown long, and my face was tanned by wind and rain. My brother-in-law accosted me by saying, "Hullo! Robinson Crusoe," and insisted on having my photograph taken, which I have unfortunately mislaid. I then returned to the ship, paid the 5s. for the dog, which I gave in charge of the men, and received back my watch. The men were sent on to their respective homes. I asked Dalley, whose home was at Exmouth, to call on my mother and give her a full account of our voyage. I bade my old ship-mates a hearty good-bye, and I have never seen any of them since.





MR. COLLINGS' UNCLE (WILLIAM COLLINGS)  
(See page 11)



I then returned to my sister's house, had a warm bath, and changed my clothes, which I had not changed for several weeks.

Thus ended one of the most eventful periods of my life.

## CHAPTER XI

### COMMERCIAL TRAVELLING IN OLD DAYS

1855. Having completely recovered my health, I resumed my duties as a commercial traveller, to the great relief of my employer, Mr. Booth, who had been doing the work during my absence, and who was greatly wanted in the management of his increasing business at home.

My journeys lay through the Midlands to the South of England, thence through the West of England to Cornwall, returning through Somerset, Gloucestershire, and Warwickshire, to Birmingham. Doing these journeys twice a year occupied about eleven months in the year, so that I was almost continually on the road. My first journey was very successful, the sales having exceeded in value those of Mr. Booth himself. My employer was much gratified at my success, as it enabled him to remain at home without any loss of trade.

In those days the occupation of a commercial traveller was very different from what it is now. The means of communication were not so great, and most of the travellers went by road, driving their own horses and vehicles. The samples which I carried being heavy, I had two horses attached to

the carriage which contained them. I much enjoyed this driving from town to town, especially in the summer, when the country was alive with harvesting and other incidents of country life. In the winter it was less pleasant, and on several occasions I was snowed up, my carriage having to be dragged out of the snowdrifts by horses borrowed from a neighbouring farm. Often in the early summer mornings I saddled one of the horses and rode for many miles before breakfast.

Taking orders from an ironmonger in a country town occupied a whole day, often more. I thus became friendly with the men and their families, and spent many pleasant evenings with them after the work was done. On market-days, when I could do no business, I dined at one o'clock with the farmers at their "Ordinary," and had long and interesting talks on agricultural matters. During the day I spent some time in the market-place, chatting with the agricultural labourers, and became even more impressed with their solid character, their accurate forecasts of the weather, their knowledge of animals, crops, and all matters pertaining to agricultural life. I became more and more confirmed in my opinion that these men, instead of being, as they were called, unskilled, were among the most highly skilled of the working class.

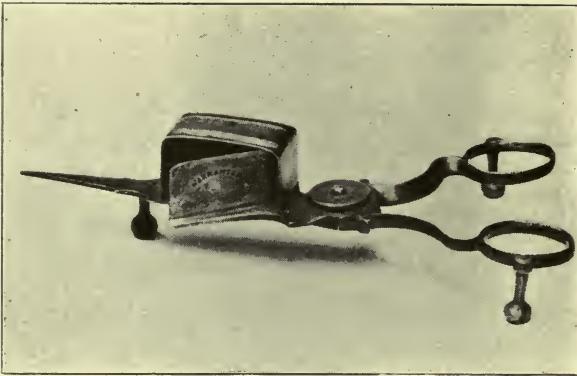
The commercial room in those days was set apart by the innkeeper for the sole use of his commercial customers. No one was allowed to enter it, except

by invitation. Adjoining the room was a closet, with racks for whips and coats. The middle-day dinner was a formal affair. A president and vice-president were elected, the duty of the latter being to order the wine—the quantity being one pint to each person. The president gave the health of the Queen, and then called on others to give such toasts as they chose. I remember the following toasts—which were almost invariably given—"Absent friends"; "Those we love, and those who love us"; "As we ascend the hill of prosperity may we never meet a friend"; "Our wives and sweethearts," etc. etc. The price of the dinner throughout the country towns was invariably 2s. 6d., exclusive of wine. The fees to the servants were 3d. per meal to the waiter, 6d. a night for the chambermaid, and 3d. a night for "boots"—all paid directly to them.

After driving my own horses for some years it was decided that it would be more economical to hire. Travelling with hired horses was then quite general. The principal innkeeper in all country towns kept post horses and post boys. I soon found that posting from town to town was not only cheaper than driving my own horses, but carried with it less trouble and responsibility. The shoeing smith, harness maker, and the veterinary surgeon were thus all dispensed with.

I look back on those travelling days with much interest. They increased one's knowledge of people, and widened one's experience of things generally.





CANDLE SNUFFERS  
*(See page 14)*



A CIDER (OR BEER) WARMER  
*(See page 25)*



A PAIR OF PATTENS  
*(See page 15)*



## CHAPTER XII

### ANOTHER EPOCH: HAPPILY MARRIED

1858. The year 1858 was an epoch in my life. In that year I married the youngest of the four daughters of Mr. Edward Oxenbould, of Birmingham.<sup>1</sup> Mr. Oxenbould was the headmaster of one of the branches of King Edward's Grammar School. As a schoolmaster his income was very moderate, but he managed to give his daughters such an education, with the requisite accomplishments, as would enable them to gain their own livelihood as teachers or governesses.

I was twenty-seven years old when I married, and my wife, who had been a governess in Liverpool, was nineteen. I believe there never was a happier union. I realised the truth of Chaucer's statement, "A gude wyf is Godde's gifte verryly." For over sixty years we have lived together in perfect harmony,

<sup>1</sup> I informed my mother of my intention to get married, and she wrote me the following letter: "My dear Boy, I think it the best thing you can do, as you will have a sincere friend and companion to make you happy and comfortable. You must do everything to make each other happy, and may the Lord be with you both, in all your doings." With a touch of the old superstition, she added: "You must not be married on a Friday, as it is very unlucky."

without a discordant note. Amidst the worries of business and other cares my home was made a haven of peace and rest, where courage was renewed and fresh effort inspired.

We celebrated our "Golden Wedding" in July, 1908, and were astonished at the widespread interest taken in the event. Letters and telegrams of congratulation poured in from all quarters and from all parties, not only in England, but in America and in the Colonies. Political Associations, Chambers of Agriculture and of Commerce, and other societies, clergymen and ministers of all denominations, including "General" Booth of the Salvation Army, sent letters of congratulation. The Bishop of Birmingham wrote from a bed of sickness: "I write these few lines in order to have the satisfaction of wishing you and Mrs. Collings God's best blessing on the residue of a life so full, not only of private blessings, but also of public benefit." I found it difficult to understand what I had done to merit such a general manifestation of kindness and affection.

We received a large number of valuable presents, including handsome, costly vases, gold and silver cups and spoons, brooches, bracelets, books, walking-sticks, etc. etc.

A number of my Unionist colleagues in the House of Commons sent me in July a gold "loving-cup" with the following letter :

“ 9 EGERTON PLACE, S.W.,

*July 2nd, 1908.*

“ MY DEAR MR. COLLINGS,

“ A number of your friends in the Unionist party in the House of Commons, whose names are given on the attached list, take the opportunity afforded by the celebration of your golden wedding to offer their hearty congratulations and good wishes to Mrs. Collings and yourself, and at the same time to ask your acceptance of this loving-cup.

“ The motives which prompt the gift are sufficiently set forth in the inscription which it bears. I will only add that I am sure you would have been gratified and touched if you could have heard the warm and even affectionate expressions of regard and respect with which contributors accompanied their gift. I believe that every member of the Unionist party would have been glad to be permitted to share in the offering, but it was decided to limit the number to fifty, and it is accordingly the first fifty members who heard of the proposal whose names are appended to the gift. You will find that they are thoroughly representative of both wings of the Unionist party.

“ With every good wish for the future, and with the earnest hope that you may long be spared to continue your career of public usefulness,

“ Believe me, dear Mr. Collings,

“ Yours very sincerely,

“ AUSTEN CHAMBERLAIN.”

The cup referred to is a handsome silver-gilt cup of Flaxman design standing on an ebony pedestal, and it bears the following inscription :

“ Presented to the Right Hon. Jesse and Mrs. Collings on the occasion of their golden wedding, by members of the Unionist party in the House of Commons, in token of their affectionate regard, and as a mark of their respect and admiration for Mr. Collings’ public career and his unselfish devotion to the service of the people.

“ *July 6th, 1908.*”

I received a letter from my dear friend Mr. J. Chamberlain from France, where he was staying on account of his illness. “The doctors as usual,” he wrote, “say that I am getting better, but, as you know, my recovery is slow. I am sorry we cannot hope to be present at your golden wedding, but we congratulate you both and wish you well. I send a pair of silver vases of Dutch origin, which I trust will arrive in time for the celebration. I hope you will accept them from us as a token of good will and affection.”

## CHAPTER XIII

### RETURN TO DEVON: EARLY REFORM WORK

1858-1863. After a very short honeymoon I resumed work. My wife accompanied me through a whole journey of five and a half months. She was cordially received by my customers and their families, and spent many pleasant times with them. My journeys, as will have been gathered, occupied eleven months in the year, leaving me very little time at home.

This long separation we found so intolerable that, soon after our daughter was born, we removed to Heavitree, a village adjoining Exeter. This being the centre of my work in the West of England, I was enabled to get home most week-ends. My business in the city itself and in the neighbouring towns occupied me three or four weeks, during which times I spent every night at home.

My salary at this time being only £225 a year made strict economy necessary. We took a small house at Heavitree, rented at £25 a year, and kept only one young servant-girl, who, with my wife, did all the housework and undertook the care of our young daughter. We made many pleasant

acquaintances and a few life-long friends. We spent seven happy years in Heavitree, and proved that happiness was not dependent on income.

As I generally spent the week-ends at home, I soon took part in the social movements in the city. Frequently on Sunday evenings I taught in the Ragged School, which seemed to be the only institution that dealt with the poorest children. I was struck with the deplorable, poverty-stricken condition of the children, both mentally and physically. I spent several Sunday nights exploring the slums of the city. These slums were situated in the lower parts of Exeter, quite away from the prosperous parts of the city, to the inhabitants of which latter the shocking condition of the poor in the former was practically unknown. Their condition could only be described by the French word "*la misère*," for which we have no equivalent in the English language.

At a public meeting I read—from notes made on the spot—a simple description of the horrible state of things I saw during my visits to these slums. Each room in the tenement houses was, as a rule, occupied by one family, often consisting of seven or eight persons, with sometimes a lodger added. In one case there was no furniture of any kind, but only hay and straw on which the inmates slept. These poor people all seemed to be steeped in ignorance and want.

My speech was fully reported in the local press,

and created a great stir in the city. It was followed by leading articles and numerous letters. Among the letters was one from the city missionaries, who indignantly denied the existence of the state of things I had described. The correspondence was, however, set at rest by a letter written by a miller, whose mill was in the lower part of Exeter on account of the stream of water which flowed through it. He wrote as follows :

“ Mr. Collings has understated rather than exaggerated the shocking state of things which exists in the neighbourhood of my mill. If any one doubts this and will call on me, I will show him a state of things far worse than Mr. Collings has described.

“ CITY MILLS,

“ JAMES UPRIGHT.

“ *May 13th, 1862.*”

After the appearance of this letter a number of influential persons—clergymen and others—called on me and asked if I would suggest any remedy for the evils now acknowledged to exist. I stated that the Government had provided a remedy in the form of industrial schools, which could be established under the “ Industrial Schools Acts,” recently passed in 1857 and 1861. These schools were being established in many places, and could be established in Exeter, and were intended to cure the evils under consideration. The Acts affected children under fourteen years of age who had committed offences punishable by imprisonment, but who, having regard

to their tender years, should not be regarded as criminals. The Acts, therefore, provided that industrial schools should be established, to which the following children under fourteen years of age should be sent instead of being committed to prison, namely :

(1) Those found begging or receiving alms, or being in any street or public place for the purpose of begging or receiving alms ;

(2) Those found wandering and not having any home, settled abode, proper guardianship, or visible means of existence ; and

(3) Those who are orphans and found destitute.

Children who come under any of these descriptions can be brought before magistrates, who, if satisfied after inquiry as to the facts, may order them to be sent to an industrial school.

After this explanation of the Acts, a small committee was there and then formed to establish an industrial school in Exeter. Subscriptions were asked for, which flowed in to such an amount as enabled the committee to begin operations at once. A suitable house was secured in the lower part of the city, which was furnished and adapted for the purpose. A master and matron—Mr. and Mrs. Curzon—were engaged, who, as events showed, were most suitable persons for the post. The school was then certified by the Home Office, and declared to be ready for the reception of suitable children.





DEVON AND EXETER BOYS' INDUSTRIAL SCHOOL, EXMINSTER  
*(See page 79)*



THE BOY RADFORD  
*(See page 77)*



The first inmate was a boy named Radford. I brought him before the magistrate and charged him with having no home, with sleeping in carts and outhouses, and being utterly destitute. As I stood before the magistrate, the words of Smollett's *Humphrey Clinker* came into my mind: "Hark ye, Clinker, ye are a most notorious offender, you stand convicted of sickness, hunger, wretchedness and want."

This boy Radford acted like a little savage. Nothing could be done with him. His first act was to throw a knife at the master, which narrowly missed him. He refused to work or do anything but skulk about. His one object was to escape from the school. One Sunday evening, however, when the matron was playing a harmonium and singing some hymns, the boy suddenly burst into tears. The matron took him in her arms, and, sobbing bitterly, he told her his story. It appeared that he was born in Crediton, and that his mother sang in the choir of the parish church, and took the lad with her. The sound of the harmonium and of the singing brought the memory of his mother and of his childhood back to him. From that hour his whole character was changed. He became a docile slave to the matron, who could do anything with him. He served his time at the school, and then, with the assistance of members of the committee, he emigrated to New Zealand, where he became a well-conducted, prosperous citizen. I corresponded

with him for several years. He told me he had a brother in the Newton Abbot workhouse, and sent me sufficient money to enable him to emigrate to New Zealand to join him. This I arranged with the workhouse authorities to do. From the last accounts I received from them they were both doing well.

The first general meeting of subscribers to the school alluded to took place in October, 1863, after the school had been opened six months. There was a large and influential gathering, consisting of the Mayor and leading citizens of Exeter and the most prominent among the nobility, clergy, and gentry of the county. The Rev. F. A. Savile, an ardent supporter of the school, as hon. secretary, read the Report. The Report stated that there were fourteen boys in the school, and that the income of the institution was above £400, drawn from subscriptions, donations, industrial earnings, Government grants, etc. The Earl of Devon, who occupied the chair, in moving the adoption of the Report, referred to Mr. Savile as the founder of the school. Mr. Savile immediately arose and, with characteristic generosity, said, "I must disclaim the honour attributed to me by the noble chairman; the whole credit lay with Mr. Jesse Collings, a gentleman who was anxious to do all he could for his fellow-creatures."

The number in the school had so increased that it was found impossible to accommodate them in the old building, and the committee after a few

years decided to build a new institution altogether. Appeals for donations to a "New Building Fund" were very successful, and in a short time they amounted to several thousand pounds. The committee secured eight acres of land at Exminster, a few miles from Exeter, and fronting the river Exe. On this site was built a commodious school with workshops and all appliances suitable for the institution. In 1869 the school was removed from Exeter to this place. Instructors in tailoring, gardening, shoemaking, and other trades were hired, and the boys were also employed in cultivating the land. The number of boys in the school rose immediately to eighty-six—the number for which it was certified.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The Superintendent, Mr. Heppell, received lately the following interesting letter :

"DEAR SIR,

" I have no doubt you will wonder who I am. I was sent to the Industrial School, in Exeter, and was one of the earliest boys who found their way there. I entered the school in 1863 and left in 1868. From the school I was apprenticed to the cordwaining at Chagford. Before my time was complete I took the Queen's shilling but my master gave me my indentures and a five pound note. I served twenty-two years in the Army and returned with the rank of Sergeant-Major. I then rejoined the Army, served in the South African War, and won a commission. When the war was over, my commission ceased. I then joined the Hants Carabineers, became Quartermaster-Sergeant, and remained in the regiment until I had to retire on account of the age limit. On August 6th, 1914, I offered my services again and was gazetted Lieutenant; was promoted Captain; and appointed Adjutant November 10th, 1914, and have been so ever since. When the war broke out, I had four sons and one daughter serving their country. The four sons were all in France

## CHAPTER XIV

### THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR: OPPOSITION TO CURRENT VIEWS

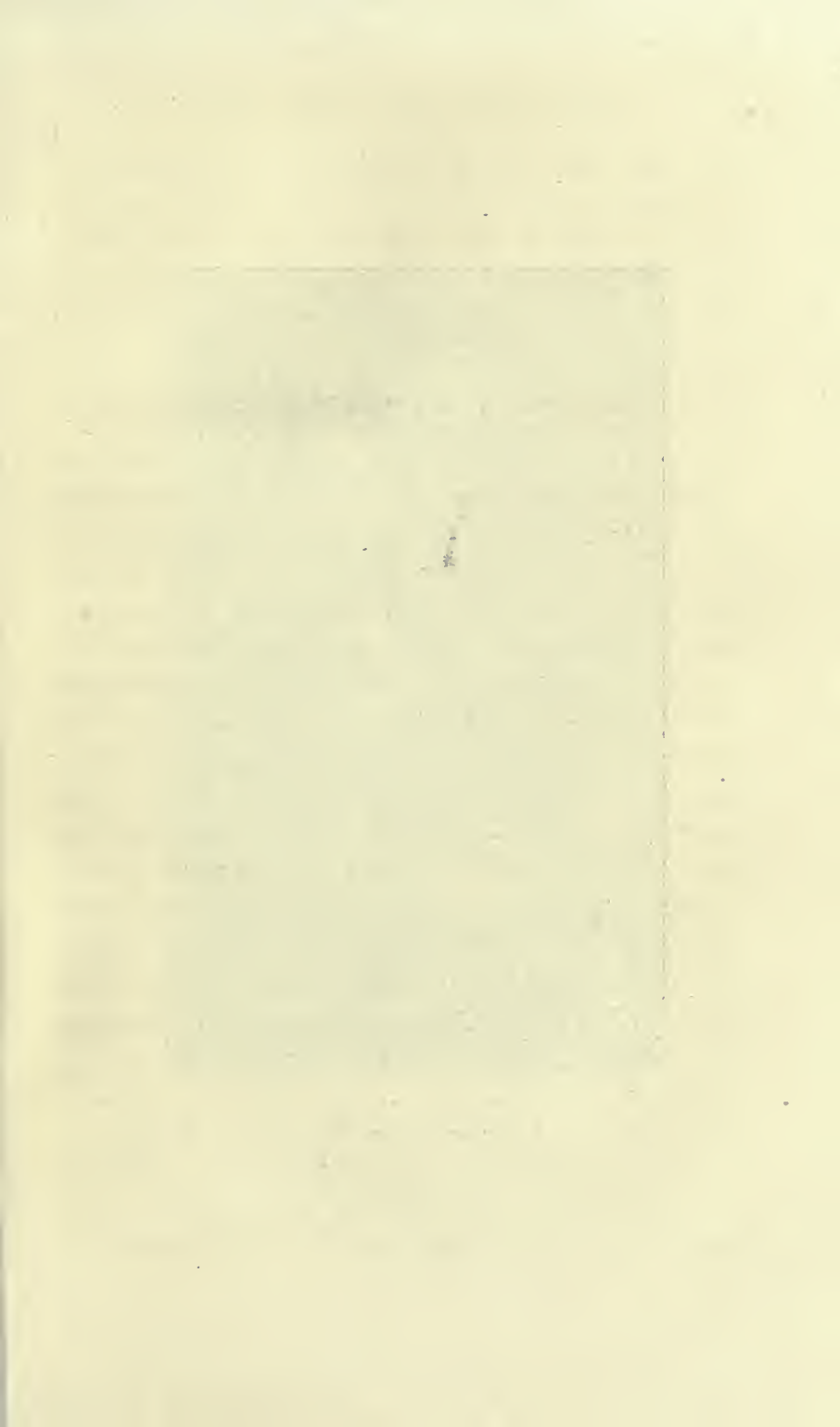
WHILE I was living at Exeter, the American Civil War broke out (1861). This was the occasion of my first entry into politics. The aristocracy and the trading and shipping classes, with some exceptions, were in favour of the Confederates. Mr. Gladstone used his influence in the same direction. He declared that "the South had made an army and a navy, and more than that, had made a nation." The local press, like the press throughout the country, were mostly in favour of the South. I had studied American affairs rather closely, and was a convinced supporter of the North. I wrote a series of letters, signed "J. C.," to the Exeter papers, which papers were strongly on the Confederate side. The leading points in my letters were as follow : After answering

together, and one of them gave his life for his King and Country—bless him. On the 10th August, 1914, myself and four boys could muster ninety-two years' service—not a bad record for an old boy of the Devon and Exeter Boys' Industrial School. Hoping I have not bored you.

" I am,

" Very truly yours,

" WM. HALL."





*Phot. H. & D. Downey*

MR. COLLINGS, AGED 30



an editor's misconception as to the real issue between North and South, and the attempt to bring American institutions into disrepute, I went on to say: " You quote Earl Russell's hackneyed sentence that ' the North is fighting for dominion and the South for Independence.' The North is fighting to preserve the Union intact. The South has not only the fullest self-government, but has governed the North as well. Out of the sixteen successive governments America has had, fifteen have been in the interests of the South, all of them being composed of slave owners or supporters of slavery, while Lincoln was the first Northern President of the United States. By his election the great Republican party has triumphed, pledged only to the non-extension of slavery. Popular democratic government was established in America under the most favourable circumstances of time, race, and locality ; and if it fails, I should despair of any people being able to govern themselves. I have faith, however, that it will succeed, that it will put down rebellion and preserve the Union. The history of the United States shows that all, or nearly all domestic troubles were caused by slavery. It is the history of the slave party aiming at dominion and striving to extend and perpetuate the institution throughout its length and breadth. It entered into religious organisations and perverted them to its uses, it entered the legislation and marked the laws with its character, it corrupted the Press, it filled

the courts of justice with its minions and poisoned the fountains of justice itself with its infamous purpose ; in fact, it corrupted every form of religious, social and political life. The Republican party at each election strove against this terrible power—grappled with it unsuccessfully until the last election, when for the first time a ' free-soil ' President was elected in the person of Lincoln. The slaveocracy, beaten in a fair election, began this dreadful war in order to destroy what they could no longer rule. There is something noble in the spectacle of the North spending its dollars, leaving its ease and prosperity, and springing to arms as one man to save their country from dismemberment."

It was remarkable (I urged) that while the " classes " in England were in favour of the South, the great body of our people never hesitated in their choice. The army of operatives in the textile trades, though they were in great distress through the shortage of cotton, saw clearly the principle at issue in this contest. They saw that the North was fighting for freedom and free institutions, and that the South was fighting for the maintenance and extension of slavery.

The arguments in my letters had no effect on the local newspapers. The editors had committed themselves too completely in favour of the South to recede from their position.

Having faith, however, in the judgment of the working classes, I gave a lecture to the " Working-

men's Improvement Society" at Exeter. I gave them the history of the Constitution of the United States, and traced the events that led up to the rebellion, using the same arguments and statements as those contained in my letters to the Press; and I concluded my lecture by saying: "Were the Confederates really struggling for civil and religious liberty—for any of the aims which make nations great—I should heartily wish them success, and say 'let the Union go.' This, however, is not so. As a slave oligarchy they are struggling not to destroy tyranny, but to establish it—for the power to hold human beings as slaves, to flog, torture, and to kill, to tear husband from wife, parent from child; in short, to outrage every feeling of humanity. That being so, I believe such designs can never in the Providence of this world be permitted to succeed, and I feel certain that the North will eventually triumph." At the close of this lecture, a resolution in favour of the North was proposed, and carried unanimously, amid loud cheers by a crowded meeting. The progress of the war is well known. The disastrous defeat of the Northern army at "Bull's Run"; the murderous battles in the "Wilderness"; the assassination of Lincoln; the election of General Grant to the Presidency; the surrender of Lee and the Confederate Armies; and the final re-establishment of the Union—all these events are matters of history.

The French writer De Tocqueville, in his work *Democracy in America*, states: "It is not clear if

the United States are a nation or not. Some great calamity may, however, arise, when it will be shown whether America is a nation or not." That "great calamity" arose when the Civil War broke out, and the bulk of the people rose to arms to preserve the Union, thereby proving that the United States were really a nation.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> When the Civil War broke out my sailor brother Henry was captain of a schooner called the *Charles*, and was doing very well. He became such an enthusiast in favour of the South that he left his ship and joined the Confederate Navy. He was Quartermaster on board the *Merrimac* in her battle with the Northern ship, the *Monitor*, in which the former was sunk. When the Confederate Navy was destroyed he joined the Army, and was taken prisoner with General Lee's forces. I did not know what became of him till I received the following letter from New Orleans, dated September 3, 1866: "I have been," he wrote, "all through the war, in the navy and army, and have come out without being wounded, but have had a narrow escape many times. Had the Confederates won, I should now be all right. I was taken prisoner at Richmond at the last 'go in' the South made. I am now in New Orleans, and am going in a steamboat."

His career had been completely sacrificed to a cause about which he knew little or nothing. He was attracted simply by a love of adventure. For the next ten years he was an ordinary sailor before the mast, taking voyages to different parts of the world. Only the pen of a Bullen or a Stevenson could adequately describe his life of hardships, adventure, hairbreadth escapes, and his never-failing courage. I wrote and urged him to come home, and sent money to pay his fare to Exmouth. He returned such a broken and aged man that I scarcely knew him. With the assistance of friends, he spent the remainder of his days in comfort at Exmouth, retaining his constant cheerfulness and enjoying the company of, and yarns with, the old seafaring men of his native town, where he died on July 8th, 1899. He was a kind, warm-hearted man, and one of the ablest and bravest seamen that ever trod the deck of a ship.

## CHAPTER XV

### ONCE MORE IN BIRMINGHAM: HEAD OF THE BUSINESS: FURTHER REFORM WORK

1864. In the year 1864 my position in the firm of Samuel Booth & Co. was greatly changed. Mr. Booth told me that he was about to retire from business, and said that, after much consideration, he had decided to offer the concern to me, and hoped I could manage to take it. My difficulty, which seemed insuperable, was the want of the necessary capital for such a large undertaking. My own savings were inconsiderable. I found, however, to my surprise, several friends, to whom I mentioned the matter, were willing to advance money to me without security. Mr. Booth himself offered to leave several thousand pounds in the business, at interest. A few of my customers also, who were men of substance, when they heard of the offer that had been made to me, lent me various sums.

In those days banks were much smaller than they are now, and few of them had branches. The managers knew their customers personally and had power to deal with them, without, as a rule, consulting their directors. Personal character and

ability were considerations with them in dealing with their customers. The manager of the Birmingham Joint Stock Company, with which the firm did business, had known me many years. I placed before him the offer which Mr. Booth had made, and explained the difficulty I had with regard to capital. He advised me by all means to accept the offer; consented to grant me an overdraft of several thousand pounds, without security; expressed his confidence in my success; and advised me to take a suitable man into partnership.

I had a customer, an ironmonger at Bridport, Mr. Chas. Wallis. I saw him, and offered to take him into partnership; an offer which he gladly accepted, as he knew the good standing of the firm. With his capital added to the above-named advances I was enabled to accept Mr. Booth's offer, and the new firm was publicly announced as "Collings & Wallis." I thus became the head of one of the largest concerns in Birmingham—a concern which I had entered fourteen years before as a junior clerk at £60 a year. The partnership proved to be most successful; and, all through its duration, Mr. Wallis was not only a partner but a close friend. He was a very able man, especially as an accountant. He, therefore, took charge of the financial part of the business, while I had the general management of the warehouse and the control of the staff, which numbered fifty persons, including six travellers. The business continued to be so prosperous, that in

a few years we were enabled to pay back all the money we had borrowed with the exception of the debt at the bank.

While not neglecting business, I found time to take part in the public affairs of Birmingham. I gave special attention to the education of the children of the poorer classes, which at that time was in a deplorable state in Birmingham and everywhere else in England.

1867. In March, 1867, a few persons interested in the question met together and formed the "Birmingham Education Society." The late Mr. Geo. Dixon, M.P. for the Borough, became president of the Society, and I was appointed hon. secretary. The first work of the Society was to ascertain, as correctly as possible, the educational condition of the town. With that view the Committee instituted a house-to-house inquiry in all the streets inhabited by the poor and working classes. It was found that the great bulk of the children of these classes had never been to school, and could neither read nor write. The Committee further ascertained that, through their poverty, the parents were unable to pay the school fees, and that this was a principal cause of the absence of the children from school. The Committee appealed to the public for funds with which to pay the school fees. The appeal was successful, and the subscriptions amounted during the year to above £1000, out of which the school fees of several thousands of children were paid.

The Society, however, came to the conclusion that voluntary efforts were a mere "scratching on the surface"; and that a national system, supported by rates and taxes, could alone do the work effectively.

1868. In 1868 I published a pamphlet, entitled *The American School System*, with remarks in favour of the establishment of Common Schools in England. As an example of the importance which the Americans attached to their Common School System, I quoted the remarks of that eminent statesman, Daniel Webster: "We regard it as a wise system of police by which life, property, and the peace of Society are secured. We seek to prevent, in some measure, the extension of the penal code by inspiring a salutary and conservative principle of virtue and knowledge at an early age." The pamphlet quickly ran through several editions, and had a very large circulation; which showed the interest the general public had in the education question. In the pamphlet I strongly advocated the formation of a society, national in its name and constitution, refusing all compromise but adopting as its platform, "national secular—(or at least unsectarian)—education, compulsory as to rating and the attendance of children, no school fees, with State aid and inspection and local management."

In the pamphlet, I contended that the "success of such a society would be certain; by lectures, meetings and agitation in every town, it would give



impetus to the fresh and ever-increasing interest felt in the question by the people. There are great numbers of persons in different parts of the country who believe that the question can be neglected no longer ; who have lost faith in the present system ; and whose isolated efforts and influence such a society would unite. It would gather to its support men of literature and science ; powerful sections of Nonconformists ; and the whole body of the people. The matter is too urgent for further delay, or for the continuance of barren controversy."

The suggestion for the formation of such a society as this was immediately adopted by some influential citizens of Birmingham, a public meeting was called, and a resolution passed to establish a society, to be named the "National Education League." A committee was formed, of which Mr. Geo. Dixon, M.P., was president ; Mr. J. Chamberlain, chairman of the Committee ; and I was the hon. secretary. The programme of the new League was that suggested in my pamphlet, namely, national free schools, universal school boards, secular (or at least unsectarian) teaching ; compulsory attendance of children ; local rates ; State aid and inspection ; and local management. At the first meeting of the Committee £7000 was subscribed in the room. Money poured in from all parts of the country. A monthly paper was issued by the Committee containing full information with regard to the movement. The Press generally spoke of it favourably

as a national cause. Workmen's societies formed branches of their own, and contributed largely to the funds of the League. In two years 300 branches were formed, in full operation, with a committee and officers to each branch. Members of the League and others addressed public meetings throughout the country. Mr. Chamberlain and I together spent some weeks addressing the working classes in different towns, explaining the programme of the League, which was received with enthusiasm everywhere. Mr. Geo. Dixon had introduced a Bill in Parliament containing the provisions advocated by the League. This Bill was defeated, but the speeches, and the division that followed, made it plain to the Government that nothing short of the principles it contained would satisfy the constituencies. There is no doubt that the action of the League in Parliament, and in the country, forced the Government to bring in the Education Bill of 1870 and to pass it into law. There was still much to be done, as that enactment did not provide free education, and it made the provision of school boards not universal, but permissive. The League's agitation was therefore continued till, a few years later, Acts were passed which established universal school boards and abolished school fees altogether.

## CHAPTER XVI

### TOWN COUNCILLOR ; AND MAYOR

1868. In 1868 I was elected a Town Councillor for the Edgbaston Ward of Birmingham. At that time the municipal affairs of the town were in a sad state. Its government was in the hands of a knot of men who had the narrowest conception of municipal duties and possibilities. They met together at a public-house called the "Woodman," and at these meetings they settled the policy to be pursued with regard to all municipal questions. They called themselves "economists"; but their economy was of the "penny wise and pound foolish" order. They had no idea of promoting the health, comfort, and higher life of the people. Disease was rife; there was no hospital for infectious diseases; the drainage of the town was of the rudest description; and there were no means for the disposal of the sewage. The solid sewage matter was carted away to a place in the neighbourhood, where it accumulated, and became a small mountain. The liquid sewage was allowed to drain into the small stream, the river Tame, which passed through Birmingham, and which became thoroughly polluted. The water people

drank was drawn from surface wells, which contained large quantities of sewage. There were 20,000 open middens, and the ashpits in the borough had a surface measurement of fourteen acres. The men who governed the town were totally unable to deal properly with this state of things. There were a few members of the Council, myself among the number, who continually opposed the majority ; but our opposition was fruitless.

1869. In 1869 Mr. Chamberlain entered the Council, and immediately became the leader of the opposition to the ruling clique. Then began what was at the time known, and ever afterwards referred to, as " the Chamberlain Era." Mr. J. Chamberlain, by his action in the Birmingham Town Council, first showed that marvellous administrative power which was subsequently continued during his Parliamentary career. The secret of his success was his trust in the people. The influential class of citizens had hitherto refrained from taking any part in the government of the town ; as they considered it, as matters stood, to be beneath their dignity to do so. Mr. Chamberlain told them that to shirk their municipal duties was disgraceful, and that as good citizens they should be proud to take their share in the government of the borough. He urged them to " think municipally," as, at a later time, he asked the nation to " think imperially." His appeals were so successful that at the subsequent municipal elections leading men stood as candidates

for the Council, and were invariably returned by the electors. The old members were thus replaced by better men ; and a period of real municipal reform—the “ Chamberlain Era ”—began.

Mr. Chamberlain showed also that he possessed that great attribute of leadership, a willingness to accept responsibility, however great. A “ Health Committee ” was appointed, and hospitals for infectious diseases were established. Bye-laws were passed for the abolishment of the smoke nuisances, and an inspector for each ward was appointed to see that these laws were carried out. Special instructions were given to the inspectors to consult the interests of the people, regardless of the vested interests of landlords and others. A Sewage Committee was appointed to consider the best means for the disposal of the sewage. The Committee produced a valuable report which was reckoned to be the text-book on the subject, and as such was translated into several foreign languages. The recommendations of the Committee were far-reaching, and involved the expenditure of a large sum of money. In spite of the strong opposition of the “ economists,” these recommendations were adopted by the Council. They were carried out without delay, and a really efficient sewage system was secured for Birmingham.

1872. In 1872 I became Chairman of the “ Free Libraries and Art Gallery Committee.” In that capacity it struck me that it was not right for those

great institutions to be closed on Sundays, the only days on which the working-classes could visit them. I therefore moved in Committee a resolution that the Reference Library and Art Gallery should be opened on Sunday afternoons and evenings. The motion was adopted by the Committee and embodied in their report to the Council.

Immediately there was a great outcry against this proposal on the part of the "Lord's Day Defence Association," Nonconformist ministers, and others who had a Sabbatarian view. They held that it would be "a desecration of the Lord's Day"; that "it would introduce the Continental Sunday into England," etc. The opposition was so strong that I was urged by many friends to drop the resolution. This I refused to do; feeling that though "consideration for the weak brother" was right, it should not be exercised to the injury of others. I determined, therefore, to submit the question to the Council—the representatives of the people—for their decision. I soon found that the working-class, as a body, were earnestly in favour of the proposal. They appointed a strong deputation to the Council in support of the Report of the Committee. That report was discussed at a meeting of the Council on April 3rd. In my speech in its support I urged that as these institutions belonged to the ratepayers in their corporate capacity, the people had a right to visit and enjoy them on all occasions in the same manner as wealthy persons

enjoyed the books and art treasures which they happened to possess. I pointed out that the working-classes being at work from morning till night were then too tired to visit institutions which their money had helped to purchase ; and that the streets and public-houses were the only places of resort open to them on Sunday afternoons. I urged that the Art Gallery was a place of education in artistic matters ; and that if art had any mission worth considering, it must be spread among the people, and not remain the perquisite of the few. I reminded my colleagues that the great mass of the people whom they represented were anxiously waiting for a favourable decision, which would confer a great benefit on them and violate the freedom of none, etc. After a long discussion, the resolution was carried amid great cheering, twenty-seven members voting for it and twelve against.

The result of the opening of these institutions was most encouraging. Thousands of working-men, with their wives and families, visited the Art Gallery on Sunday afternoons, and enjoyed the pictures and works of art, which were all new to them, and to visit which was an education in itself. The Reference Library was crowded in a similar manner by those who came to read and study. In face of this success, the agitation against the movement completely died down, and few among the former opponents retained their opposition to it.

1873. This year Mr. Chamberlain was elected Mayor,

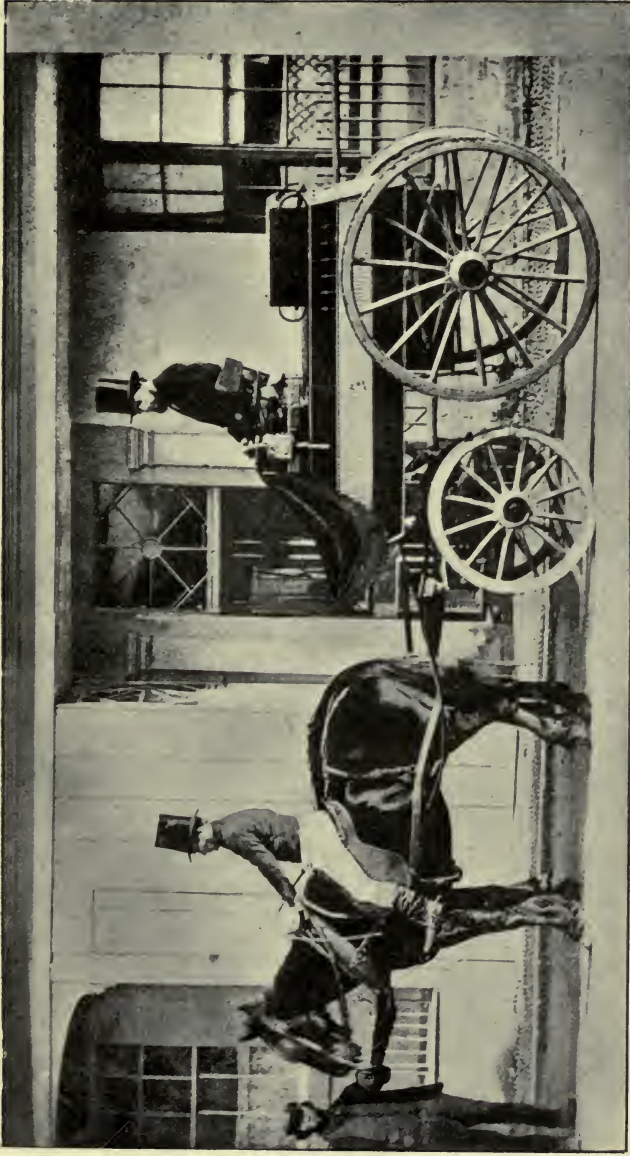
and he was re-elected in 1874 and 1875. The three years of his Mayoralty were indeed "the golden age of the municipal life of Birmingham." Undertakings of vast importance were carried out at a cost of some millions of pounds. The Council acquired the gas undertakings—by buying out the private companies—at a cost of two and a half millions sterling. The "economists" declared that a great loss of public money would be the result of this transaction. Mr. Chamberlain, however, assured the ratepayers that under the management of the Council the undertaking would be very profitable, and would yield a handsome yearly sum in relief of the rates.<sup>1</sup>

Then followed the purchase by the Council of the Water Companies, in order to secure a cheap and ample supply of water: to be followed in its turn by the great scheme for bringing water from Wales to Birmingham (eighty miles)—a scheme carried out by those enthusiasts who, after Mr. Chamberlain left the Council, were imbued with his ardent municipal reform spirit. By this scheme the polluted surface wells were closed and every house in the borough, however small, had a continuous supply of pure water.

Mr. Chamberlain, however, before he retired from the Council, also inaugurated another great "Improvement Scheme," carried out at a cost of 2½

<sup>1</sup> This prophecy was abundantly fulfilled. At the time of writing a profit of £30,000 a year is handed over to the municipal treasury.





MR. COLLINGS: COMMERCIAL TRAVELLING  
(See page 67)



millions sterling. At that time the centre of the town consisted of filthy, disease-stricken slums, in which the death-rate was 73 per 1000. Under the "Improvement Scheme" many acres of these slums were "scheduled" and bought by the Corporation.<sup>1</sup> The miserable tenements were swept away and healthy dwellings erected in their place. Through one part of the scheduled area a fine street was made (Corporation Street). The land on each side of the street was not sold, but let to builders on a seventy-five years' lease. On it were erected fine shops, offices, institutions, etc. When these leases fall in the Corporation, as representing the people, will become the largest landowners in the city (as it is now called).

In carrying out his great works Mr. Chamberlain had the hearty co-operation of the majority of the Council and the full support of his fellow-citizens. The result of all was that Birmingham was pronounced by a high authority to be "the best-governed city in the world."

In the spring of this year (1873) and onwards much interest was taken in the country and in Parliament in regard to Mr. Samuel Plimsoll's efforts to save from unnecessary risk the lives of our merchant seamen. The movement for what is now known as "the Plimsoll Line" created much opposition on the part of interested shipowners and their

<sup>1</sup> As the scheme progressed the death-rate diminished till it fell to 12 per 1000 only.

friends, but like all movements which have justice as their basis, it gathered momentum as time went on and the reform was adopted. I was hon. secretary to a fund raised in Birmingham to assist Mr. Plimsoll, and I attended and spoke at several public meetings on his behalf. On one occasion a meeting was held in the Town Hall, Birmingham, in the year just named when, owing to the absence of a speaker who was to have been present, Mr. Plimsoll—who was in London and was eagerness itself—engaged a special train at the very last moment, and turned up in time to address the meeting, which received him with loud and continued applause.

In moving the resolution before the meeting, I made two assertions. The first was, that there “are large numbers of ships ill-found, rotten, and unseaworthy, whose only chance of safety is in avoiding storms, and in slipping from harbour to harbour.” The second was, that there “are enormous numbers of over-loaded vessels sent out of our ports every year—vessels which, through the cupidity of the owners and inhuman disregard of life, are loaded with ton after ton of cargo until they are brought so low in the water that it is known as an absolute fact they must founder and go to the bottom if they meet with tempestuous weather.” The position, I urged, was shameful when it was known that “if the owners get these vessels to the port for which they are bound they make enormous sums of money,

whilst if the vessels founder they get a large insurance, so that they are the gainers."

The controversy raised by Mr. Plimsoll, forgotten now by the younger generation, was one which raised not merely opposition, but considerable bitterness. However, Mr. Plimsoll's movement and policy were justified and succeeded ; as no merchant sailor, at the instigation of a shipowner, can now be put to sea in an unseaworthy vessel.

1874. In the spring of 1874, with some relatives, I spent six weeks in Italy, during which time I visited, among other places, Turin, the Italian Lakes, Naples, Rome, Pisa, Florence, Venice, and Milan, returning via Paris. I was greatly interested in the museum at Naples, and at Capri I visited the famed "Blue Grotto" and other noted places, including the catacombs, which latter form a large subterranean town. At Rome, I paid several visits to the Vatican. On one occasion, I went to High Mass, and saw the Pope, the Cardinals, and Priests who attend him. It was a gorgeous scene. I spent some hours in the picture galleries at Venice. Whilst there, I noticed some American girls enter one of the galleries. As soon as they got into it, the father of the girls came along and exclaimed, "Come, girls ; we've got photographs of all this !" and he thereupon straightway walked them off. The tour was a most interesting one, and I thoroughly enjoyed it.

In the following year Mr. Chamberlain and I went

through France to Algiers. On our travels, we arrived at Cette, a small town where there was a large wine factory, and where "genuine" sherry was produced at 9d. a bottle! We were told that this sherry was sold to steamships for the use of the passengers, which caused me to form a deep suspicion of sherry sold on a liner. At the entrance of another small town which we passed was a large notice board stating "In this place we do not worry"—a capital motto for all those who can possibly avoid worry.

On our way by steamer from Marseilles to Algiers we met a high wind and rough sea, and I was reminded of the Frenchman's description of *mal de mer*, viz. "The first time I was sick," he said, "I was afraid I should die; the second time, I was afraid I should not."

Whilst in Algiers, where vegetation of all kinds is most luxuriant, we had occasional conversation with some of the better class Arabs. One man, who appeared to be a sort of priest, gave us a wonderful dissertation on the subject of their religion. It was interesting and amusing on account of the miraculous incidents narrated, the man's fertile imagination, and his extravagant ideas. On our return journey, we visited the grave of John Stuart Mill at Avignon.

1878. In November, 1878, I was, by the unanimous vote of the Council, elected Mayor of Birmingham. My term of office was an eventful one. The winter of

1878 was very severe, with twelve weeks' continuous frost. This, coupled with a bad state of trade, threw some thousands of persons out of employment. It was reckoned that there were above 100,000 families destitute, many of them on the verge of starvation. I felt that, as Mayor, I was responsible for something being done in the form of relief. I accordingly opened a subscription list, called the "Mayor's Distress Fund." The donations to the Fund amounted immediately to above £10,000. The city was organised, and a relief committee formed in each ward. Voluntary workers of all creeds made house-to-house visits, and gave relief in the form of food, fuel, clothes, blankets, etc. There probably never was a fund administered more cheaply and effectively. Thousands of families were relieved and enabled to tide over the severe winter.

While it was customary for the Mayor of the city to entertain the officials and leading citizens to dinners, balls, and other entertainments, very little was done in that or any other way for the common people. I decided, therefore, to give a series of free concerts in the Town Hall. I issued a circular stating: "It is to be regretted that in this town no opportunity exists for hearing high class music, except by such payments as are too high to be within the reach of the majority of the people. It consequently happens that the popular taste for music remains undeveloped, and the pure delight and absolute usefulness of good music restricted

to a comparative few. I therefore propose to invite to these concerts only persons who, from various reasons, are unable to obtain the enjoyment of listening to high class music ; in the hope not only of affording an evening's pleasure to a large number of people, but that from these concerts something permanent may result in bringing good music within the reach of all classes." I then prepared 20,000 tastefully printed cards of invitation and sent them to doctors, ministers of religion, hospital authorities and others ; asking them to see that they were given only to those who could not afford to pay for the enjoyment of high class music. I appointed a committee of musical men to make the arrangements ; and only stipulated for one condition, namely, that the concerts should be of the highest class. They, however, assured me that the common people would not care for such, but would prefer entertainment of a more popular character. I met their objections by a sentence for years afterwards quoted in the musical world. I said, " Mendelssohn will beat ' Champagne Charlie ' (the popular song of the day) if you will give him a chance, but not so long as half a guinea is charged to hear his works and sixpence to hear ' Champagne Charlie.' " Events proved that I was right. The programme consisted of several selections (choruses and airs) from Handel's " Messiah " and " Samson," Haydn's " Creation," two organ solos from Batiste and Haydn, a few high class solo songs such as the " Village Blacksmith "



(Weiss), "Dear England" (Louis Diehl), three part songs, namely, "When Winds Breathe Soft" (Webbe), "O, My Luve's like a Red, Red Rose" (Garrett), "Venetian Boat Song" (Cusins), and the Market Chorus "Masaniello" (Auber).

With the exception of the "stars"—whom I could not afford to engage—the concerts were precisely the same as those given at the Triennial Birmingham Musical Festivals. The choruses were rendered by the Birmingham Festival Choral Society. The concerts were a complete success. The people listened in rapt silence to the strains of the celebrated organ in the Town Hall and, in spite of the cries of "hush, hush," broke out in rapturous applause when the "Hallelujah Chorus" was given. Most of the artistes I had engaged from London gave me back half their fees, saying that they had never before sung to such attentive and appreciative audiences. Following these concerts the Birmingham Musical Association was formed, to give weekly concerts of a high class on Saturday nights at a charge of 3d. and 6d.

1879. In the summer of 1879 a presentation was made to me "in recognition of the vindication of the right of free speech."

A large meeting had been held in the Town Hall, Birmingham, on the 3rd of December, 1878, in connection with Afghan affairs. I was Mayor at the time, and presided over a town's meeting. There had been a good deal of jingoism about the country.

At Bath the platform at a meeting was destroyed, and in other towns the right of public meeting was practically extinguished.

At the meeting at Birmingham were some 200 or 300 persons who intended that no meeting should be held. I deemed it my duty to prevent the meeting from being disorganised by these unruly people, and, having come to this decision, I ordered the objectors—who were very persistent—to be ejected, and they were ejected.

The uproar continued for about an hour or an hour and a half, but after the ejection of the malcontents, who formed but a small portion of the audience, a two hours' meeting was held, where assent and dissent were freely and orderly expressed, and a vote on the question before the gathering was easily taken.

In consequence of my action at this meeting I was prosecuted. It seemed to me that it was the duty of the First Citizen of the town to ensure that a town's meeting should be of an orderly description, especially as in looking over England at the time, in almost every other large town one saw the right of public meeting being imperilled.

Sir Henry James (afterwards Lord James of Hereford) defended me. I consented to a verdict against me on one condition. The condition was that the magistrate who tried the cause should state a case for consideration by the higher courts so that the question of the rights of chairmen at public

meetings should be settled once for all. The magistrate consented: but, in the opinion of Sir Henry, the case as stated was of no use at all for the purpose, and I was thereupon fined the nominal sum of a guinea. I refused to pay it. I have never paid it. It is possible some of my friends may have done so, but of this I am quite unaware. A great opportunity in my opinion was thus lost to settle the rights of chairmen at public meetings generally, and they have never been settled to this day. I was threatened with imprisonment on my declining to pay the guinea, but I stuck to the position I had taken up, and said to the magistrate: "You put the Mayor of Birmingham in prison and see what will happen." The Mayor was not put in prison.

In the winter of 1879 Mr. Chamberlain and I went on a tour through Spain. The Empress Eugenie crossed the Channel on the same boat on her way to Madrid to attend the marriage of the King of Spain.

When we reached Cordova, a most interesting old Moorish town, although the weather was very cold there was not such a thing as a fire-place in the whole town.

Granada seemed to be occupied by gypsies when we got there. We were introduced to their king, who was a great "swell" and who thought "no end" of himself. He was reputed to be very rich. Everything and everybody here seemed to be a hundred years behind the time.

Whilst at Malaga, we thought we would visit

Gibraltar. The regular steamer for Gibraltar left in the middle of the night, but Captain Weyman, of the *Adendale*, Sunderland, agreed to take us, though, as he explained, he had no accommodation for passengers. When we went on board in the evening, the captain, who was a very pleasant man, took us into his cabin, where there was a bed and a small sofa. Pointing to me, he said: "You can have the bed, and the youngster can knock it out on the sofa." I spent the night very comfortably; but "the youngster" was not so comfortable, the sofa being very hard and much too short. We spent the day in looking over Gibraltar; which I thought an extremely interesting place.

After a clear two days in Gibraltar we left for Tangiers—a typical Moorish town. We had a guide there called Mahmoud, a very handsome Moor, above six feet high. At night we went out with him; and it seemed like a scene from the *Arabian Nights*.

The next morning we visited some orange groves several miles away. The dark native gardeners, clad in white shirts, gave us branches covered with oranges, some of them of a very sweet kind. The oranges, fresh gathered from the tree, are far more delicious than those imported to England.

We spent Christmas Day in the train, and when we returned to England at the end of December we were both very well, in spite of many discomforts incident to the tour.

## PART II

### MR. COLLINGS AND LAND REFORM



## PREFACE TO PART II

SOON after Mr. Collings finished writing Part One he was stricken with illness which prevented him from using his pen, from undertaking the physical labour of putting further material together, and even from dictating the same—in spite of a marvelous memory and keen mental alertness.

He had been staying at Exmouth in the early part of 1917; and I was a happy visitor to him on that occasion as on others. He caught a chill when travelling back to his home at Edgbaston, Birmingham, and from this ensued a prolonged and incapacitating illness which, so far as this work is concerned, has had the result indicated in the first paragraph hereof.

It has been my privilege to be particularly intimately associated with Mr. Collings for over thirty years in his efforts for rural reform. For various reasons it was considered by some of his nearest friends that those efforts should be made generally known: and Mr. Collings, in view of the illness referred to, desired that if any description of them was to be made public I should be entrusted with the task.

I undertook the task for more than one reason, and I can truly say it has been a labour of love throughout. In the first place, I know of no other instance in modern times where one man, in spite of so many difficulties, has pursued so steadily, so persistently, so courageously, and over so long a period one fixed purpose or policy, and with such success. In the second place, as the facts are certain from time to time to be sought after by rural reformers, and I was probably in the best position to state them, it seemed to me I ought to do so.

My object has been to describe Mr. Collings' work for rural reform. In doing so I have had to begin at an earlier period than when he entered Parliament, as the text shows. I have dealt only briefly with those other matters in which, in common with other public men, he devoted a share of his time; as it seemed to me desirable rather to focus attention upon the chief work of his very full life—rural reform. Nor have I added much as to his views upon or in connection with the politicians, etc., of his time excepting in so far as the same bear particularly on the reform work in question. In taking this decision I consulted Mr. Collings, and acted in accordance with his wish.

I could say much of Mr. Collings' personality, of his fine Devonian figure, his amiable character, his completely unselfish motives, his sturdy independence of mind and his rectitude of purpose—an independence and a rectitude so characteristic of



the yeomen and peasant stock of England—of his extraordinary and wide sympathies, his great capacity for making friends, and of his happy home associations ; but I refrain, as this was not part of my present object, and I must be forgiven for not dwelling upon the same here. I will only add that his struggles and his work have been an inspiration and an encouragement to myself, and that I cannot doubt they will be so to very many others.

JOHN L. GREEN

2 BELMONT PARK,

LEE, S.E.

*March, 1920.*

## CHAPTER XVII

### MR. COLLINGS ENTERS PARLIAMENT

1872-80. For several years prior to 1880, in which year Mr. Collings entered Parliament, he had been interested both in the condition of the agricultural workers and in that of agriculture generally. His upbringing, reading, experience, and journeys in the country parts, and the knowledge he had of his ancestry, all told him of a state of things essentially unsatisfactory, whether considered from the personal aspect of the rural people themselves, or from that of the nation at large.

It is therefore not surprising that he should become very actively concerned with Mr. Joseph Arch in the formation both of the Warwickshire Agricultural Labourers' Union and of the National Agricultural Labourers' Union, which latter almost immediately grew out of the former.

Mr. Collings dealt at length in his book *Land Reform* (the first edition of which was published in 1906 and a cheaper edition in 1908) with the attempts which were made at various previous periods of our history to organise the agricultural workers ; so it is necessary now only to deal with





*Photo, H. J. Whitlock & Sons, Ltd.*

MRS. JESSE COLLINGS

the movement which Mr. Arch started, and with which Mr. Collings was at once and very intimately associated:

The Warwickshire Agricultural Labourers' Union was formed on Good Friday, 1872. A crowded meeting was held in the afternoon at the Public Hall, Leamington, to consider and draw up the code of rules for the government of the Union. Mr. Arch was in the chair, Mr. Collings and others being present. In the evening of the same day a further crowded and enthusiastic meeting of agricultural workers and their sympathisers was held in the Public Hall in question, under the Presidency of Mr. Auberon Herbert, M.P.

These were pioneer and significant meetings. Mr. Collings, after speaking at the meetings upon the miserable, wretched, and hopeless condition of the workers, urged upon them that their cry should be to secure a closer connection with the land, a better education, and more remuneration for their labour.

A correspondent who was present at these gatherings declared that "the sight of the men present was one of the most remarkable" he ever witnessed. "Between fifty and sixty delegates from Wellesbourne, Cubworth, Batley, Rodway, Snitterfield, Tysoe, and other villages and hamlets of the county, met to form a Union, to pass its rules, and elect the officers. They were all men of mature, some of them advanced, age, honest and manly

looking, with an air of resolute determination, which augured well for any work which they might undertake. The manner in which they conducted the business meeting proved the correctness of this estimate, and clearly demonstrated that they well knew the seriousness and importance of the task which they had undertaken.

“The speeches were short, practical, to the purpose, and abounded in common sense, the reason being, they all spoke from experience. One curiously illustrative fact came out in the discussion on the amount of weekly payment to be made to the Union, which showed as much as a vast amount of statistics, the sad condition in which the labourers now are. The question was, should the sum be twopence or three halfpence a week. One old man, from the Tysoe district, stated in the most emphatic manner that the additional halfpenny would make a great difference in the number of members. He said, with an earnestness which made his words pathetically eloquent, that he was a most ardent friend of the Union; that for more than twenty years he had prayed for it, wept for it, and looked with ever-increasing longing for the day when it should be formed; and now he was only troubled with the fear that even one labourer should be shut out from its advantages. His language was quaint, his dialect was pure Warwickshire; but his phrases had a Scriptural ring about them, which at once proclaimed the local

preacher. The business of the afternoon was well done. The rules, as amended, were passed, the Board appointed, and the members then adjourned to a well-earned tea. After tea the public meeting was held. The hall was densely crowded, and another largely attended meeting was held outside. The speeches were temperate, earnest, and to the point. Every speaker seemed to feel the great responsibility of the occasion, and the audience fully shared the feeling. It was an excellent meeting, admirable alike in tone and expression, and the utmost good may be anticipated from so earnest, enthusiastic, and judicious a beginning."

In April, 1872, a Finance Committee of the Union was appointed, of which Mr. Collings was a member. The other members were Mr. Edward Jenkins, Mr. E. Haynes, and Mr. Arch.

Towards the end of the next month the Warwickshire organisation had grown to such an extent that it had 64 branches and 4695 members, and applications were pouring in every day asking the officials to attend meetings at other places for the formation of new branches. It was therefore decided to hold, and there was held towards the end of the same month, a National Congress at Leamington, under the presidency of Mr. George Dixon, M.P. for Birmingham.

At this Congress the Executive Committee of the Warwickshire Union reported that they were unanimously of opinion the time had now arrived for the

formation of a "National" Union of the Agricultural Labourers of England and Wales. This report was read and adopted, and the National Agricultural Labourers' Union of England and Wales was at once formed. After its formation, at which Mr. Collings was present and spoke, a large meeting was held in the evening, between 2000 and 3000 persons attending, chiefly of the labouring class. Mr. George Dixon, M.P., again presided. Mr. Collings urged once more combination, and intimated that "everything must give place to the one object, the success of the Union." Emigration had been spoken of and more or less approved by the original Union. That was quite understandable, but both then and at the particular meeting now under notice Mr. Collings urged that such emigration as might take place should be entirely of a "voluntary" kind, and that the labourers should not be forced to emigrate if by any possibility they could find remunerative work in their own country. He also stated that the men who had to live on such low wages would not and must not rest until the land laws were amended, and they themselves had secured an interest in the land.

Whilst Mr. Collings was speaking at the meeting a telegram from Birmingham was put into his hands: "Return at once, your warehouse is on fire." He crumpled the telegram, finished his speech, and returned to Birmingham after the meeting; remarking that "he felt that this grand



movement was worth all the warehouses in the kingdom."

On December 27th, 1872, at a public meeting held for the purpose of celebrating the affiliation of the Warwickshire Agricultural Labourers' Union with that of the National Agricultural Labourers Union, Mr. Collings again spoke strongly and frankly in support of the proposed unification of interests. He stated that in future "no power on earth could make a labourer what he was before he had conceived the new idea of combination," and he added that henceforth he would be a new power in the land, and that "another result of the movement would be possession of the franchise." It was absurd, he said, to call a man free when he had no share in the government of his country, and no hand in the making of the laws which he had to obey; yet that was the position of the agricultural workers. The movement, too, was, in his opinion, "the first real step towards the settlement of the land question, which question cannot be settled without the aid and without the votes of the millions of men who are most closely interested in it." It had been stated that the labourer by any such settlement would lose certain perquisites, which, according to the then Earl Beauchamp, "were many both in youth and age." These perquisites, as Mr. Collings viewed them, came under three heads: "hard work and no education while young, hard work and semi-starvation in manhood, and the

workhouse in old age." To gain the objects Mr. Collings had in view meant, he said, struggles ahead, and "combination is the grandest help that we can ever have to pull through them." It was asserted that the movement would cause trouble, as the labourers would adopt a policy of retaliation. In his view, the labourers had had provocation enough already, but "they have not and will not retaliate, firstly, because they have too much good sense, and, secondly, because they know that public opinion, now on their side, would at once fall away." Mr. Collings was at this period and ever since wishful that the farmers and the labourers should work together. It was and is his firm conviction that if the farmers would only help the workers they would find in them—the labourers—"their greatest allies," as he called them.

From 1872 to 1880 Mr. Collings was occupied not only with the hard "spade work" connected with the National Agricultural Labourers' Union—putting in a very considerable amount of time at its frequent and regular committee meetings, which, as he has often informed me, required much anxious thought—but with much other public work in Birmingham. His business, too, most of the period, claimed its share of his time. He was, therefore, as may well be imagined, working at extraordinarily high pressure.

An event now occurred which was, perhaps, only to be expected, considering the public character of

much of the work in which he had been engaged. He was asked in 1880 to contest as a Liberal the Ipswich division for Parliament, which he did in that year. He was returned, and he sat for the division until the Election of 1886, when in April of that year he and his colleague, Mr. H. W. West, were unseated on petition.<sup>1</sup> The split, however, in the Liberal Party over Home Rule for Ireland came a few weeks later, when there was held a General Election, and Mr. Collings then contested, as a Liberal Unionist, the Bordesley Division of Birmingham; for which Division he was returned and sat until he retired from Parliament at the General Election of December, 1918.<sup>2</sup>

From 1880 Mr. Collings, being now in Parliament,

<sup>1</sup> Mr. Collings and his colleague were personally absolutely blameless in this matter, their being unseated being entirely due to others. The judge, in delivering judgment, on April 1, 1886, said: "There is no charge of—nor would there be any pretence for charging anything like—personal corruption on the part of the respondents." *The Times* newspaper, on April 2, 1886, stated in a leading article that Mr. Collings and his colleague "both lose their seats through no fault of their own."

<sup>2</sup> On May 20, 1880, when he took his seat, he was too late to go in with the batch of Members who were at the moment being sworn, and so met with a little adventure. Mr. Chamberlain led him down the House as far as the table, where he took the oath and signed the roll. Whilst he was doing this, Sir Erskine May momentarily turned aside; and, not unnaturally thinking all was over, he proceeded to walk from the table without being formally introduced to the Speaker. Sir Erskine May, however, promptly captured and brought him back, and, amid some good-natured laughter, he shook hands with the Speaker and proceeded to his seat.

was able to advocate with more and more effect the claims of the agricultural workers; and, moreover, in due course, to put in concrete form, by motions and Bills, his ideas—which were rapidly forming themselves—as to the requirements of the situation as he saw it. He had, in fact, come to the firm conviction, which nothing that has happened since has caused him to alter, that it was absolutely vital to repopulate the rural districts, and that the chief means to this end was to re-establish the peasant proprietary class which had been “extinguished” (to use his own word) by mistaken legislation. In this the National Agricultural Labourers’ Union agreed with him. Further, and it was a feature in his advocacy and one which unquestionably still needs developing, he seized every occasion that presented itself to impress on the *urban* public this aspect of the question. It seemed to him essential to do so. One of these occasions occurred in connection with a meeting in 1880 of the Cardiff Branch of the National Federation of Liberal Associations, when he was called upon to speak. After dealing with the general political situation, he dwelt upon the injustice involved in the land laws, which, he said, were exceptional among civilised countries, and tended to encourage immense holdings. He pointed out a number of what he regarded as abuses, and said that these must be swept away before we could hope to have a happy and prosperous peasantry. He urged strongly that it “behoved the inhabitants of

the large towns to join in agitating for the necessary reforms, which, when secured, would tend to the social elevation of the people."

In the winter of this year Mr. Collings went with some relatives on a holiday to the South of France, calling on the way upon Miss Beatrice Chamberlain, Miss Margaret Nettlefold, and Miss Ethel Chance, who were at school at Fontainebleau. He much enjoyed the visit, and both on this and on numerous other tours abroad he came back strengthened in his determination to do all he could to place our rural workers on a footing at least equal to that of the peasantry of the Continent.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### A MOTION ON THE LAND QUESTION: THE FARMERS' ALLIANCE, ETC.

1881. Mr. Collings' maiden speech in the House of Commons was made early in August, 1881, when he moved the following resolution, viz. "That in the opinion of this House grants in aid of art and industrial museums should not be confined to London, Edinburgh, and Dublin."

At that time something like half a million sterling was expended out of the national resources on the public institutions of London of the kind named, whilst the provinces, which of course contributed liberally to those resources, were placed upon, as he described it, the "starvation allowance" of £1500 yearly amongst them. Great progress has been made since that time in giving practical effect to the resolution, with which Mr. Mundella, who was in charge of the educational interests of the country at that period, could not conceal his sympathy.

Mr. Collings, however, in the same month, having by this time well taken his bearings, so to speak, in the House of Commons, began the memorable work therein on behalf of rural land reform, with which his

name will forever be associated. On August 25 he tabled a notice of a motion on the English land question, the motion being in the interest of creating a peasant proprietary class. The fact was a good deal commented on at the time. One of the daily newspapers remarked that it was "a most significant and pregnant incident of the sitting," and it was added that the subject of the motion was one of which "we shall presently hear a good deal." Mr. Collings was drawn into a correspondence immediately the notice was given, some of it of a kind which it is perhaps better not to describe. It is interesting, however, as showing the trend of opinion in certain quarters, to mention that at the first meeting of the Executive Committee of the National Agricultural Labourers' Union, held at Bedford on September 16, in the year mentioned, the following letter was issued :

" DEAR SIR,

" At a meeting of the Executive Committee of the National Agricultural Labourers' Union, held at Bedford, September 16, 1881, it was unanimously resolved :

" 1. That this meeting regards with great satisfaction the following notice of motion, given by Mr. Jesse Collings, M.P., to be moved in the next session of Parliament : ' That, in the opinion of this House,

it is desirable, in order to increase the productiveness of the land, to arrest the decline of the rural population, and to promote the interests of the commercial industries of the country, that provision should be made by Parliament to facilitate the acquirement by agricultural labourers and others of proprietary rights in the soil they cultivate.'

" 2. This meeting is of opinion that, while other reforms affecting the freedom of the land are absolutely necessary, the principle contained in this motion is the only one on which the land question in England can be satisfactorily settled.

" 3. That legislation based on this principle would restore the connection, now almost destroyed, between the cultivator and the soil ; would largely diminish pauperism ; and would increase the numbers, and raise the social condition of the rural population.

" 4. That it would add to the strength and prosperity of the State by covering the land with a class of proprietors, whose highest interests would be in the careful and industrious cultivation of the soil.

" 5. That by increasing the productiveness of the land it would stimulate the prosperity of our manufacturing districts, by affording better markets for their productions.

" 6. This meeting therefore pledges itself to support Mr. Collings' motion by all legitimate means, and it earnestly prays the Government, on the



grounds of public policy, to adopt the principle of the motion, and to promote such legislation during the coming Session as shall give facilities to labourers and others for acquiring proprietary rights in the soil they cultivate.

“7. That the President—Mr. Joseph Arch—be requested to issue an appeal from the National Agricultural Labourers’ Union to the industrial classes in towns, factories, and mines asking for their sympathy and aid in an effort to secure legislation, which, by increasing the food supply of the country, and consequently the demand for the products of the towns, would unite both town and country in one common interest, and secure the permanent advantage of all.

“8. That the President be requested to communicate with the ‘Farmers’ Alliance,’ and to ascertain if they are willing to co-operate<sup>1</sup> with the National Agricultural Labourers’ Union in their efforts to secure a reform in the land laws on the principles contained in the foregoing resolution, and also that the President be respectfully requested to invite from the County Members of Parliament a promise of their support when the motion is before Parliament.

“9. That a copy of the foregoing resolutions be forwarded to Mr. Gladstone, the Lord Chancellor, Earl Granville, the Marquis of Hartington, Mr. John

<sup>1</sup> This farmers’ organisation, long since defunct, did not do so. In that course it has been followed by farmers up till now.

Bright, Mr. J. Chamberlain, and Sir William Harcourt.

“ We are, sir, yours obediently,

“ ROBERT COLLIER,<sup>1</sup> General Secretary.

“ JOSEPH ARCH, President.”

Mr. Collings seized the opportunity this letter afforded to outline his ideas on the subject of land reform and to deal at the same time with the Farmers' Alliance and their attitude towards his policy and views.

It had been suggested to him that the Alliance consisting of tenant farmers would prove the best means of securing assistance to the agricultural workers. Mr. Collings had not found the farmers, as a class, eager to espouse proposals which he regarded as in the best interests of their workers, although he has always gladly admitted that there have been and are many most worthy individual exceptions to this general statement. He has, however, always held the view that an alliance between farmers and their workers is eminently desirable if it can be brought about.

The following important extract is from a public statement he issued in September, 1881, and gives a very good idea of his views, carefully expressed :

“ The reforms,” he said, “ in our land laws proposed by the ‘ Farmers’ Alliance ’ consist in dealing

<sup>1</sup> Mr. Collier became a very valuable member of the Committee of the Rural Labourers' League (referred to subsequently) of which Mr. Collings was President.

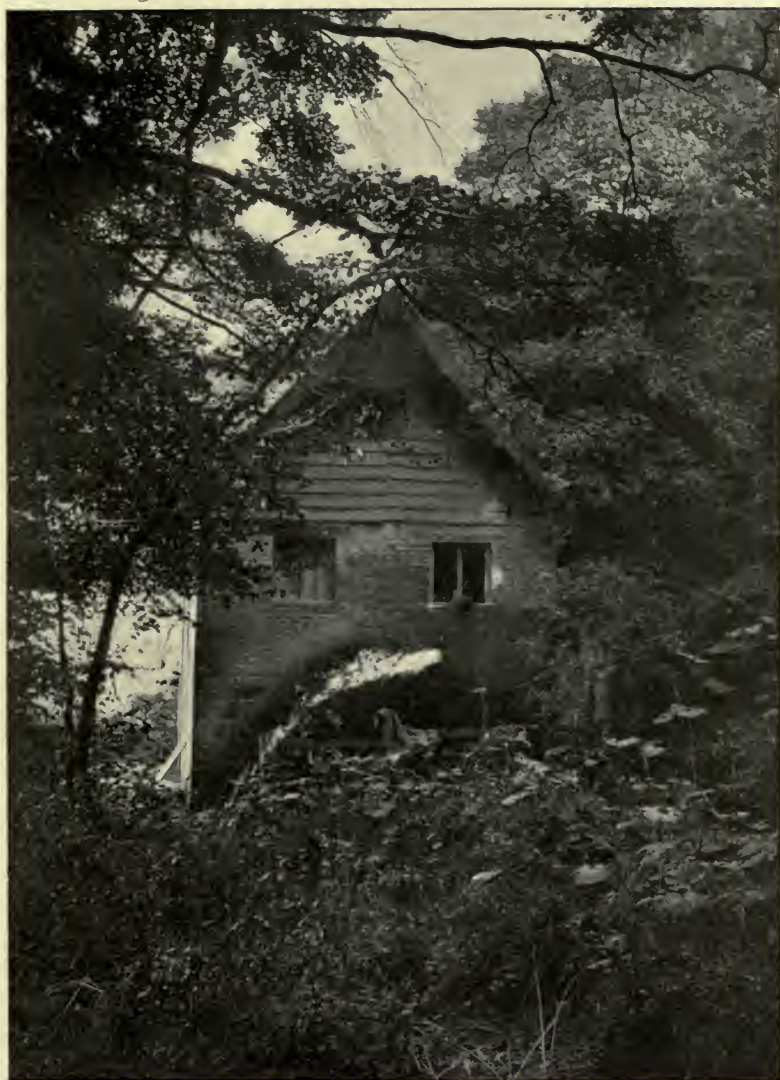
with entail, primogeniture, settlement, transfer, and compensation for improvements; but it is to be feared that the farmer, as a class, through his long and hereditary subjection to the tyranny of our present land system, will not be able at once sufficiently to emancipate himself to demand more than partial reforms, and that with timid and divided voice. He cannot yet see that his natural ally is the people, and not the landlord. Therefore, there is no proposal in the programme of the Alliance for the regulation of rent. The bugbear 'freedom of contract' with regard to rent, which has happily been knocked on the head in legislation for Ireland, stands apparently too strong to be attacked by these land reformers at home.

"In the reforms advocated by the Farmers' Alliance no notice is taken of the agricultural labourers. This most numerous class of farmers (without farms) is left out of account altogether. And yet any reform which does not multiply four-fold the labour on the land must, as far as the public interest is concerned, be a failure. No doubt it is contemplated that the labourers will partake of the overflow of the farmers' expected prosperity, and that their wages will be raised perhaps from 12s. to 16s. per week, with the usual prospect of the work-house when their life's work is done. *But such a prospect will not bring back the labourers who have left the land, or arrest the rapid decline in their numbers and quality now going on.* Under the proposed

reforms, the landlord will retain the power to increase rent as the productiveness of the land increases, a power he will surely exercise in prosperous times. The farmer can leave, it is true, and be entitled to compensation for improvements ; but this he will not do so long as he can make ends meet, as he cannot escape from the system by change. Being deprived, therefore, or liable to be deprived, of the benefits resulting from the employment of abundant and well-paid labour, he will rather seek to save out of wages, even at the cost of diminished production.

*“ There seems to be but one reform able to meet the case, namely, for the State, on grounds of public policy, to assist farmers to become their own landlords on limited-size holdings. It is of still greater importance to create, by the same agency, a large class of peasant proprietors.*

“ The cultivator who is the owner of his holding has his ‘rent’ practically fixed forever. He knows the exact amount of it, and all that he gains beyond is his own. He has the highest inducements for the exercise of thought, skill, industry, and enterprise ; for the employment of more and better paid labour in order to increase to the utmost the yield of the soil. The land is his bank, into which he puts all his own labour and all that he can purchase with an assurance of a safe and ample return. It is evident that the results of this system would be an enormous increase in the productiveness of the land, and consequently in the prosperity of the whole community.



OLD WATER-MILL AT WITHYCOMBE

*(See page 22)*



The increased demand for labour would cause thousands who are now shut up, and leading struggling lives in large towns, to find their way back to the land. Our villages, now growing smaller and more silent, would gain new life. The blacksmith's shop and the wheelwright's shop would be reopened, the country towns become more prosperous, and corresponding demands made on our manufacturing centres. I will only allude to the various agricultural industries which such a system as this would develop, especially if the education in our village and country schools were made to supply the technical knowledge relating to those industries. For instance, we should produce at home the twelve million pounds' worth of butter, the annual importation of which into a country like England is a most disgraceful reflection on our present system. Vegetables would be supplied to our towns at least 40 per cent less than the high prices which now obtain. The production of cheese, eggs, honey, sugar-beet, poultry, etc., would all be improved.

“ Under a system of land monopoly, or under any reform of it which leaves landlords full power over rent, the labourers must always be at starvation wages. *But could the peasant—with the passionate attachment to the land which leads him now to seek plots for which he is willing to pay enormous rents—have land of his own to cultivate he would have an object in life, and while securing a modest competence, would have higher aims and increased self-respect.*

*This is one, probably the only, solution of the miserable problem of pauperism which costs so many millions a year, and reflects so much disgrace on a wealthy country like ours."*

In October, 1881, at the annual meeting of the National Liberal Federation which was held in Liverpool, Mr. Collings, anxious to enlighten the urban public in drawing special attention to the land question, boldly declared that whether the Federation "support my views or not, I shall preach them to the working classes of England"—a remark which was received with loud applause. He suggested that perhaps the Federation might take the question up "from a national point of view"; and stated that he was inclined to think it "cannot do better work."

In the same month, at Ipswich, he regretted that the farmers, through their Alliance, had brought in a Bill "dealing purely with questions relating to landlord and tenant," and that nothing apparently was to be attempted "towards ameliorating the lot of the agricultural workers." A great opportunity, in his view, was being lost by the land not being treated as a great national question affecting every man, woman, and child in England.

Mr. Everett, one of the most respected of East Anglian Members of Parliament, was on the platform at Ipswich, and was supposed to and did represent the agricultural interest. His representation, however, whilst always able, stopped short



of any real practical advocacy and assistance of the cause of the agricultural labourers, and, in response to something in the nature of a challenge from that gentleman on the accuracy of certain figures relative to the actual position of the labourers, Mr. Collings indicated that his figures and information were entirely within the mark, and were obtained from actual conversation with the agricultural community, and especially with the labourers during some recent inquiries he had made on the spot in southern and western counties. He stated, for instance, that he had visited districts in Worcestershire, Hampshire, Warwickshire, and Wiltshire, where he had found the labourer getting 10s. a week. In one large district the men, at that very moment, were receiving 9s. a week, out of which they had to pay 1s. 6d. a week rent; whilst, as he sat by the hedge-side at meal-times with them, they made their dinner upon bread and onions. At night when he had gone into their cottages, as he had done scores of times, and found the everlasting bread again for their children and themselves, with no comfort in the present, no pleasant retrospect, and no apparent hope for the future, he considered it was enough to make anyone a serious politician. "I tell you," he said, "there is a great social danger. The land is getting more silent. The towns are more and more crowded. In Warwickshire, one out of every forty-two is a pauper; in Birmingham we have one out of thirty-four a registered pauper, and twice

that number who are paupers in all but name. Let me ask my moderate friends to recognise the social danger there is in the present state of things."

One of the newspapers, rather ironically, yet with much point, observed that whilst in Ipswich, where Mr. Collings' remarks were uttered and printed in over six columns, only a few lines of a summary character were published even in Birmingham where he lived and where he was well known; and yet any slight reference to his action in Parliament in disagreeing with the Government or differing from the Irish Members on the question of their obstruction, was published broadcast.

Mr. Collings before the end of the year was again drawn into considerable correspondence by members of the Alliance and others agreeing or disagreeing—generally the latter—with his views. He had felt, from his past knowledge of the importance of education for the working classes in the urban centres, that it was equally and even more important for the agricultural workers; and hence, in the November, during the course of the correspondence in question, he took the opportunity of stating what—especially in the light of the Agricultural Education Bill which a few years later he introduced in the House of Commons—helps to show the shaping of his thoughts at that time.

"I would give," he said, "in every village national school a technical knowledge of agriculture—explanations, as far as they can be given, of all the beautiful

and interesting natural phenomena as seen in the land, down to the wonderful work in the economy of nature which the poor earth worm—as Darwin has just shown us—is perpetually carrying on. Half an acre of land attached to each village school and a properly trained teacher, are the chief requisites for this process. I must disclaim, however, any originality in this idea. If any of my correspondents will go into the poor country of Switzerland they will see the ordinary teacher trained to teach such things to the poorest children in schools that are free.”

One correspondent, voicing what, no doubt, some others of his class thought, said Mr. Collings “had not studied the question of agriculture or rural reform,” and that he “knows nothing about it.” It was an easy way of getting rid of a troublesome proposition, but Mr. Collings briefly and caustically replied that he would not presume to speak on the question if he had not studied it. Another alluded to the failure of the Feargus O'Connor land scheme, and this particular matter is only referred to now because, from time to time since that date and even quite lately, the scheme has been quoted as showing that only failure is likely to result from the establishment of a peasant proprietary class. This correspondent said: “I remember well myself the breakdown of Feargus O'Connor's land scheme; after laying out three estates and building homesteads upon them. With

ten to twenty thousand small shareholders, extremely few obtained lots by ballot ; and of that number the prizes fell to weavers and such like who had no capacity for agricultural life. The result was inevitable. The estates were mortgaged by the society in order to meet the outcry for more ; and the collapse came."

Mr. Collings' reply, as usual, was to the point and as effective as could be wished. He said anybody might have seen that failure would result from a scheme " which put unskilled men such as weavers on the land, simply because their chance in the ballot for land was a favourable one." He added—and he gave instances to show—that where workingmen who were acquainted with the cultivation of land were placed upon it, they had been thoroughly successful, even, in fact, where the land was bad and much of it mere waste. He offered to take the correspondent to such places ; but he received no acceptance of his offer, or reply to his letter.

Following upon this, he was asked to speak again in the urban centre of Derby, towards the end of the November, but as he was unable to be present Mr. Arch took his place. He wrote on that occasion to the chairman of the meeting to say that " no one can put a question more fully or forcibly before you than he (Mr. Arch) can. I trust that one of the first results of the coming extension of the franchise to the labourers will be to see him in Parliament," which was the case, Mr. Arch being returned in

1885 for North-West Norfolk. The incident is mentioned because Mr. Collings expected great things from Mr. Arch on his (Arch's) getting into Parliament.

During the course of his speech, Mr. Arch alluded to Mr. Collings' motion, and spoke, generally, in the moderate terms one would expect. It is often thought by those who oppose change that those who are advocates of it are seeking what, in their view, is tantamount to confiscation. The rural class of England are not spoliators, and least of all the agricultural workers. It was not unnatural, therefore, to find that Mr. Arch said that Mr. Collings' motion was "one which no reasonable Englishman would attempt for one moment to put down. I do not wish to be considered one of those confiscators and spoliators that my Lord Salisbury has talked of. I believe that if this question is fairly put before the British public, and if our landed proprietors will look it fairly in the face, they will at once see that the proposed change will not be injurious to any class. It will, in fact, be just to the land proprietors, to the tenant farmers, to the agricultural labourers, and to the public generally. We do not want to steal the land, but it is very remarkable to hear some of our landed proprietors crying out about confiscation."

Mr. Arch made a strong yet moderate speech, as was to be expected from one racy of the soil, and with a ready command of his native English ; but it was a

reasonable speech, one full of argument, and it breathed a tone of fairness to all classes. At the conclusion of the meeting the terms of a petition to Parliament were agreed upon, and the following is a copy thereof: "That your petitioners view with grave concern the uncultivated condition of much of the land of England, and the consequent distress amongst the employed labourers, and respectfully and most earnestly pray your honourable House to pass the motion of Mr. Jesse Collings in favour of peasant proprietorship, which they believe would practically remedy the existing evils." The motion, however, *did not come on* and was reserved for a subsequent year.

During the remainder of this year Mr. Collings addressed many other meetings in different parts of the country on the land question, including two at Liverpool, one at Warrington, one at Birmingham, and one at Smethwick. Prior to his Birmingham meeting there had been a meeting of the farmers in the town, at which the following resolution—no doubt intended for him and for those who were of his way of thinking—was passed: "That this meeting desires by every legitimate means to ameliorate the condition of the agricultural labourers, but will by every means resist the interference of designing political agitators, who seek for their own selfish purposes to sow dissension between the employers and employed in the agricultural districts of the Midland Counties." In the light of what has

been said upon the moderate tone of the land reform advocates, the reference to "designing political agitators who seek for their own purposes to sow dissension between the employers and the employed" is interesting, and illustrates the difficulty then attendant upon the prosecution of rural reform. The resolution, unfortunately, showed the feelings at that time of all too many opponents.

Mr. Collings always had the strongest possible sympathy with the Irish people and his courageous sympathy soon brought him into conflict with his constituents. For instance, during the Second Reading of the "Protection of Person and Property (Ireland) Bill," which was a very strong measure of "protection" brought in by Mr. Gladstone's Government, he made a strong speech against the measure, with the result that he much offended some of the Ipswich electors.

Thereupon he met them in public meeting, and although all who spoke from the platform were extremely kind in their expressions as to the honesty of the convictions he entertained and the course of action he had pursued (and admitted also that a representative was entitled to exercise his own opinions when he became a Member of the House), yet there was more or less regret expressed by each of them that he had not seen fit to support the Bill, which had a backing by Mr. Gladstone, Mr. Bright, and other well-known names. Mr. Collings, however, maintained his position, and added, "I do not regret

having spoken against the Bill, and I would do it again." This courage had its further reward, for the Council of the Liberal Association of the borough passed a resolution unanimously, thanking him for his "advocacy of the rights and liberties of the people" and expressing confidence in him as a representative of the borough in Parliament.

There the matter ended so far as the particular speech against the Bill was concerned ; although it is just and proper to add that in the course of that speech he also alluded to the remedial measures which he considered should be passed for Ireland rather than the "Coercion" Bill alluded to. Moreover, he spoke strongly against the Nationalist Irish Members who were, as it seemed to him, only too ready to adopt a policy of obstruction even to the remedial measure of the Irish Land Bill—conduct with which he had not the slightest sympathy.

These remedial measures have been carried out, and many others, especially as regards Irish land reform ; in fact, Ireland in this last respect has been placed in a better position than any other part of the United Kingdom.

In July of this year a meeting was held in Birmingham for the purpose of presenting to the Mayor of the place on behalf of the town, Mr. Collings' portrait, which had been subscribed for by nearly 6000 working men, in appreciation, as was stated at the time, "of the services rendered by him to the



town in which he resides." The Mayor, during the course of his remarks in accepting the portrait, said, "possibly of all Mr. Collings' labours as Mayor of the town none were so much appreciated as his efforts to secure free speech at public meetings."

## CHAPTER XIX

### ALLOTMENTS EXTENSION ACT; AND THE FRANCHISE OF THE FARM LABOURERS

1882. For some time there had been a desire that the Act of Parliament known as 2 William IV, Cap. 42 should be effective; and, accordingly, during the Session of 1882, Mr. Collings brought forward the Allotments Extension Bill. This secured a Second Reading on May 17th of that year, and it passed into law during the Session.

This measure directed that the trustees of lands allotted under Enclosures Acts or farmed in any other manner, appropriated for the general benefit of the poor of any parish, should let them in allotments to the labourers. The Charity Commissioners were the obstacles to the measure of William IV being put into full force, as they held that it applied only to the trustees of lands allotted under Enclosures Acts. It was thought they were wrong in giving the measure so limited an interpretation, but to prove that an action at law would have been necessary. Mr. Collings, therefore, brought in the Allotments Extension Bill to simplify and to remedy matters. He did this by the desire of friends

interested in the charity lands of our various parishes, and the Act has been of enormous benefit.

The Act applies to lands held by trustees for the benefit of the poor, "whereof the rents or produce are distributed in gifts of money, doles, fuel, clothing, bread, or other articles of sustenance or necessity." The Act is not optional, but is compulsory. The public would perhaps be surprised at the enormous amount of charity land which comes within the scope of this enactment. There is every reason to suppose that many trustees of such charity land are not even yet aware of—others completely ignoring—their duties under the Act; whilst the Charity Commissioners—who, owing to the rebuffs they have received in Parliament at the hands of Mr. Collings and others, are rather more sympathetic towards the rights of the poor to-day than they were when the Act was passed—still do not feel it incumbent upon them to put the enactment into force, unless some complaint or complaints are made to them in regard to its evasion.

The measure was commented upon widely throughout the country, as its passing met a long-felt want. Mr. J. Theodore Dodd, a young barrister, whose father was the Rector of Hampton Poyle, a rural village of Oxfordshire, Mr. Howard Evans, at one time editor of the *London Echo*, Mr. Richard Harris, a barrister, and Mr. Edward Jenkins, previously mentioned, did much to inform the public of their rights in these rural charities; whilst the first two

were mainly responsible for the drafting of the Bill itself. It was first introduced by Sir Chas. Dilke in 1874, and again in 1875, when, after discussion, it was rejected. It was because of Mr. Collings' special interest and activity in the cause of rural reform that he was asked, and undertook, to bring it before the House in 1882.

The feeling of the agricultural labourers regarding the measure was promptly manifested at a meeting of the Executive Committee of the National Agricultural Labourers' Union, when Mr. Arch moved the following resolution, which was seconded by Mr. Ball, and carried unanimously: "That the grateful thanks of this meeting be accorded to Mr. Jesse Collings, M.P., for his earnest efforts in procuring the passing of the Poor's Land Allotment Act, and that the members of the Union be urgently requested to inquire without delay into the Charity Lands in their respective villages, so as to secure for their own benefit the advantages of the Act."

That the Act was welcomed is further shown by the following quaint letter received by Mr. Collings from a body of labourers in Norfolk:

*Sept. 18, 1882.*

"SIR,

"We take the libety of riten to you About the Por Alotment Bill, as the Por at — aa anshes to Have some of the Land which belong to them,

we are the Por that wish to have the Land But not sent in their names for the Alotment.”

(Here follow nine signatures.)

The envelope was addressed :

“ Mr. Jesse Colesam, M.P.  
Barmingham.”

The passing of the Allotments Extension Act, which in many directions was referred to as the “ Poor Man’s Land Act,” at once aroused immense interest amongst the agricultural labourers throughout the country, and the National Agricultural Labourers’ Union never ceased to give prominence to the subject. Moreover—as Mr. Collings asserted would be the case—the interest in it largely assisted the claim at this time being made for an extension of the franchise. At the Executive and other meetings of the Union, for instance, resolutions were passed or petitions adopted in favour of extending the franchise to the labourers, because it was recognised that by such a course of action, the labourers’ interest “ would be quickened in those various matters, including the land, in which they were becoming increasingly interested.” One of these petitions adopted at the annual meeting of the Union held at Peterborough in May, 1883, is interesting for a view Mr. Collings held on a certain public matter, and which was called forth on this occasion.

The petition was as follows :

“ To the Honourable the House of Commons, of Great Britain and Ireland, in Parliament assembled. The petition of the inhabitants of Peterborough, in public meeting assembled, sheweth that your petitioners are deeply impressed with the anomalies of the present system of Parliamentary representation, by which large numbers of their fellow countrymen are deprived of all rights of citizenship, though compelled to bear a share of its burdens, and earnestly but most respectfully pray your Honourable House to pass a measure which shall extend the franchise to all householders in the rural districts.”

Mr. Collings was present at this meeting, and Mr. Cremer, M.P., who spoke, said : “ There are only two Members in the House of Commons who are directly the representatives of the working classes.” To that remark Mr. Collings took objection, and he went on to say : “ We are not for class representation of any kind.” (Hear, hear.) “ We are not for returning a man simply because he is a soldier, or a landowner, or a working man. We want the people to have the power of returning working men, if they like to do so, without let or hindrance. That power is all they need. There should be no obstacle, either pecuniary or otherwise, to prevent or make it difficult for a working man to enter Parliament, *but we are not prepared to choose an inferior working*

*man, simply because he is a working man, over a superior man who is not a working man."*

Whilst the agitation to give the agricultural workers the franchise was proceeding it was more than once asked "what the labourers will do with the vote when they get it," and scepticism was not confined to one political party as to the real need for giving the vote at all.

Mr. Collings replied as follows: "As to what the labourers will do with the vote when they get it is not my business. I am inclined, however, to believe that they will know *what* to do with it. The land question, for instance, is a subject that cannot be settled without consulting nearly 2,000,000 of agricultural labourers who were born upon the soil, and whose necessities form part of the agricultural question."

At this period, too, a further interesting incident happened in connection with the establishing of a peasant proprietary class. Mr. Collings wrote to the President of the Miners' National Union calling attention to the motion on the subject of which he (Mr. Collings) had given notice. The letter and motion were read at the annual Conference, which was sitting at that time, and were received with every mark of sympathy. Mr. Broadhurst, the Secretary of the Union, had intended to second the motion, but he had little, if any, experience of the land, and therefore Lord Lymington, M.P., undertook to do so. Mr. Broadhurst naturally thereupon

withdrew, but some of the members of the Trade Union Conference demurred to this, as they thought the withdrawal was a surrender, as they urged, to a "bloated aristocrat"; but the wisdom of Mr. Broadhurst's step was generally recognised, because it showed that some landowners were now receiving with sympathy views which Mr. Collings had previously expressed, and towards which so many of them had hitherto, unfortunately and mistakenly, shown little or no sympathy at all. The move was a wise one, in Mr. Collings' opinion, as it indicated that there was no necessary antagonism between class and class—the latter being a view which he has always cherished, though criticising severely those who seek to impose the system of "landlord and tenant" as the sole system under which land can be best cultivated in this country.

In this year once again, Mr. Collings' vote in opposition to the Prevention of Crime Bill, or the Coercion Bill—the name by which it was known—formed the subject of controversy, especially amongst his Ipswich constituents. He therefore, in reply to one of the letters received from an Ipswich elector, wrote as follows: "My position with regard to this Coercion Bill is precisely the same as it was towards the last. I contended that repressive measures, while powerless to detect and therefore to punish crime, had invariably the effect to increase outrage and to make matters worse. It is admitted—you will no doubt admit what is a fact—that



crime, outrage, and evictions largely increased under the last Coercion Bill, just as I said they would. I say the same about the still more stringent one now before the House. There is no clause in it likely to detect crime, but every clause in it is calculated to create secret societies and consequently crime. . . . You may not class as 'outrage' and Irish crime the cruel evictions now taking place—hundreds per week—the details of which are heartrending, and often result in starvation and death, very often in despair and crime. *I do so regard them.* They are plebeian; it is true, and have few among the English to care for them, but the sufferings of the poor are as acute as those of the rich. It is because I am so opposed to crime and disorder of all kinds—in deadly opposition to them—that I oppose the measures that tend to drive men to despair and crime. . . . I cannot tell you how sorry I am to have to differ from some of my Liberal friends; but, at the beginning, you must admit that I told my constituents openly and decidedly *that I could not vote for Coercion Bills*, and gave my reasons most fully for that course. I have, therefore, deceived no one." Such frankness, courage, and transparent honesty were appreciated by his constituents; indeed, at no time in his career has Mr. Collings been deficient in any one of these qualities.

The Sunday opening of museums and art galleries was a subject in which Mr. Collings had long taken a good deal of interest, believing that the opening

of such places at reasonable hours would prove of public advantage.

Accordingly in the same year, he ventured, in the House of Commons, to state the case for their opening.

“ One Honourable Member,” he said, “ represents the matter as if the question is whether we should be deprived of our Sunday and our Sunday’s rest, but the motion of my hon. friend, the mover of the motion, is not *to compel* people to go into museums or art galleries, but to give them an opportunity of doing so if they choose. The hon. gentleman asks where are we to stop ; why not open the theatres as well as national galleries ? It is difficult, no doubt, to say where we should stop. The question of the hon. gentleman should have been asked when omnibuses and trains were allowed to run. The fact is that each question must be settled on its own merits ; and, when the hon. gentleman asks what distinction there is between national institutions and theatres, the answer is that the working classes of this country should be allowed to enjoy their own property on a day when they would be free to do so. It is just the same when the hon. gentleman enters his own library or art gallery ; the only difference is that he is the sole proprietor, while they are co-proprietors. A pamphlet has been quoted from which it has appeared that the visitors to the art gallery of Birmingham in the three years ending 1881 were only 942, 749, and 594 respectively.

The pamphlet, however, forgets to state that these figures relate to years after the gallery had been burnt down. In the three previous years the numbers were 41,000, 36,000, and 29,000." Mr. Collings quoted the terms of a resolution of the Birmingham Trades Council to show that that body was in favour of the opening of art galleries and libraries, and he stated that it was within his own knowledge that there "were many men who, formerly in the habit of spending their Sundays at the public-house, afterwards became regular visitors to the art gallery of the borough." The Member for Stoke had stated that "labour should accommodate itself to the traditions of the country." That statement was cheered by the Opposition, "and," said Mr. Collings, "I do not wonder at it, for no more conservative sentiment can be uttered.

"In the mind of the Member for Stoke it seems that it does not matter whether people who can pay a guinea subscription to the Zoological Gardens or other places of resort visit these places on Sunday, but that it will make all the difference if a working man takes his wife and family to a picture gallery which is open free. *Then* it becomes almost a crime to throw the doors open to those who, in their corporate capacity, own the picture galleries and museums. You talk of the elevation of the working classes, but they cannot all rise. Let us bring home to the working people the means of rational enjoy-

ment. Ministers and clergymen who had opposed the opening of these places have come to me and declared, after experience, that they were wrong in their fears, and that they now saw the opening of the libraries and art galleries tends to promote the best interests of the people. I have before me a list of the volumes issued on Sundays in one library. There were 22,000 volumes issued. The list is headed by 'History, Biography, and Voyages.' 'Poetry and the Drama' come next; and after these 'Art and Science.' I am bound to say that the last, except one, is 'Theology,' and the last is 'Works of the Blind.' If the masses can but be induced to evince an earnest desire for art and literature many existing social problems will approach their solution. That being so, every means should be adopted to provide an adequate supply of art and literature. It is absurd to say that a working man can enjoy art galleries in the evening. How can a man who works from 6 a.m. till 7 or 8 p.m. be expected to go afterwards to a gallery or a library? By continually placing difficulties in the way of the realisation of proposals such as that now before the House, and overlooking the demoralising enjoyments which exist, hon. members are retarding the intellectual and moral progress of the nation."

In September and October Mr. Collings, Mr. Joseph Chamberlain, Mr. Austen Chamberlain, and Mr. Richard Chamberlain went on a tour through Sweden, Finland, and Russia. He states that he

observed on the journey from Kiel to Copenhagen the land was "well cultivated by small farmers who were busy at work in the fields."

During the party's stay at St. Petersburg they "were very busy, and saw most of the sights there." They "visited the celebrated Winter Palace of the Czars—an immense place, with large suites of apartments; some of them—including those of the Emperors—being very simple."

Everything relating to Peter the Great and every relic from his hands were "held in great veneration"—a strange contrast with the events of the last two or three years in Russia.

From St. Petersburg they went to Moscow, a "much more interesting place." The hotels were "luxurious and the food most excellent, while within a stone's throw in the market-place groups of peasants might be seen feeding on rotten eggs." The Kremlin was visited "several times."

The Governor-General of Moscow courteously placed a special train at their disposal so far as Warsaw when they left Moscow. He sent a "Prince" to inform them of this arrangement. Princes were very common in Russia, and Mr. Chamberlain with a smile asked him (Mr. Collings) if he should give this "Prince" half a crown for his trouble! The special train was "furnished with every comfort—a kitchen, cook, waiters, sleeping berths, etc., and a high Russian official to superintend all the arrangements."

In looking back Mr. Collings says: "We all immensely enjoyed what proved to be a most interesting tour, during which we did not have a single bad day."

## CHAPTER XX

### ANOTHER MOTION IN PARLIAMENT: MR. GLADSTONE AND THE LABOURERS

1883. It is interesting to note that the first agricultural speech Mr. Collings made in Parliament was on behalf of the farmers. This was on July 18th, 1883, when the Agricultural Holdings (England) Bill came up for discussion. The speech was listened to somewhat impatiently, though that did not worry one of his crusading character. Every word, however, he then said had the ring of truth about it, and subsequent events have completely justified the attitude he took up. "I believe," he said, "there is not one tenant farmer in a dozen who will benefit by the Bill." (Cries of "Oh!") "Well, time will show whether that is the case." (Cries of "divide.") "Honourable members are impatient, but I have no desire to speak long. I can fully understand they fail to appreciate the point of my remarks." Mr. Collings referred to the case of tenants who had expended much money on their land, thereby improving it, whereupon the first opportunity was taken of raising the rents; and he concluded his observations by describing

the Bill as "a mere sham and make-believe." Few people, in the light of the later legislation dealing with the very same subject, and in the light of the present day demands of farmers to secure that they shall have the full benefits of their expenditure for improvements, will say Mr. Collings was either inaccurate or unreasonable.

Mr. Collings was now well in his stride in Parliament. His motion to give the cultivators of the land a proprietary interest in it, which had not yet been discussed, was to come on on March 9th, 1883; but Mr. Gladstone made an appeal to him to postpone it to a more favourable opportunity. This was a great disappointment to him and to the labourers. The National Agricultural Labourers' Union, a few days afterwards, sent a memorial to Mr. Gladstone expressing regret at the postponement. They went on to say that for some years past the farm labourers had been agitating to improve their conditions, and that in the face of great difficulty, opposition, and a considerable amount of persecution, they had conducted the movement in a constitutional manner and with due regard for law and order. The memorial continued:

"At the present time the farm labourers are looking forward with hope to the establishment of a peasant proprietary in England as a powerful means of improving their condition; and we believe that at the same time it will also add to the wealth and prosperity of the country." This being



the case, the memorialists appealed to Mr. Gladstone "to undertake that facilities shall be provided for discussing Mr. Collings' motion at an early date, on the reassembling of Parliament." The memorialists considered that in this way they were asking nothing unreasonable, seeing that whilst almost all sections of the community had frequently occupied the time and attention of the House of Commons, the agricultural labourers had been almost wholly forgotten. With the exception of the Allotments Extension Act of last Session, brought in by Mr. Collings, and for the passing of which the labourers were profoundly grateful, there had been "no legislation in modern times directly affecting them as a class."

Considering this fact, and also that the labourers were deprived of all political power, the memorialists felt assured of Mr. Gladstone's sympathy.

In reply to the foregoing memorial, the following was received from Mr. Gladstone, through his secretary, Mr. E. W. Hamilton :

10 DOWNING STREET, WHITEHALL,

*March 23rd, 1883.*

"SIR,

"Mr. Gladstone has had the honour to receive the communication which you have addressed to him on behalf of the Executive of the National Agricultural Labourers' Union, respecting Mr. Jesse Collings' motion on peasant proprietary.

He is sorry that it could not be discussed the other day, and he will bear in mind the representations which you have made to him. In view, however, of the difficulties in Parliament of making progress with work already in hand, he fears he can give no promise as to devoting a portion of the limited time reserved for Government business for the purpose of discussing the motion in question."

The newspapers with but an isolated exception here and there showed little interest at this moment in the labourers apart from a party interest, and Mr. Collings was again disappointed with the reply referred to. However, the Executive Committee of the National Agricultural Labourers' Union were not content to let the matter drop any more than Mr. Collings was himself; and, therefore, on July 2nd, 1883, Mr. Arch was requested to write to Mr. Gladstone as follows :

" DEAR SIR,

" I see Mr. Jesse Collings has succeeded in obtaining Friday, July 20th, for his motion on Peasant Proprietorship. Permit me, sir, in the name of the farm labourers of this kingdom urgently to request you, as Prime Minister, to use your influence with the Government to allow Mr. Collings the opportunity to bring on his motion on the day named. The rural population are very much in earnest about this question, and numbers were

greatly disappointed that the motion did not come on on the last occasion, but when informed, through the columns of their own paper, that it was to meet the wish of the Government that Mr. Collings agreed to a postponement of the motion, they were quite satisfied with the action of the honourable member for Ipswich. They will be much pleased to know that there is a prospect of this important question being discussed this session. The labourers sincerely pray that the Government will do all they can to show that they take as deep an interest in their social prosperity, as in their political freedom.

“ I am, dear sir, your obedient servant,

“ JOSEPH ARCH.”

To this Mr. Gladstone sent the following reply :

10 DOWNING STREET, WHITEHALL,

*July 4th, 1883.*

“ SIR,

“ Mr. Gladstone has received your letter, and he desires me to assure you that due weight will be given to the considerate manner in which Mr. Jesse Collings on a former occasion gave way to meet the convenience of the Government, but you will understand that Mr. Gladstone must also be guided by the general feeling of the House in the matter to which you refer.

“ I am, sir, your obedient servant,

“ HORACE SEYMOUR.”

It will, to say the least of it, be apparent that Mr. Gladstone, however strong his sympathies may have been with the agricultural labourers, was not himself prepared to secure Mr. Collings' motion coming on unless the general feeling of the House was favourable to that course. There is no reason to suppose that either he or the then House of Commons was favourable to the motion, as will appear presently. Political parties still lacked sympathy, insight, and statesmanship.

The motion, however—the first that Mr. Collings proposed in the House—came on on July 20th, 1883, and was as follows :

“ That in the opinion of this House it is desirable, in order to increase the productiveness of the land, to arrest the decline of the rural population, and to promote the interests of the commercial industries of the country, that provision should be made by Parliament to facilitate the acquirement by agricultural labourers, tenant farmers, and others of proprietary rights in agricultural land.”

Before Mr. Collings was allowed to proceed with his speech an attempt was made to count out the House to prevent his proceeding at all. It was ineffective ; and Mr. Collings continued : “ In the direction of this resolution will be found an important means of arriving at a permanent settlement of the land question. The present land system, whose tendency is to place land in the hands of an

ever-decreasing number of proprietors, has been abolished in every other part of the world, and has entirely broken down as far as England herself is concerned. Its effect has been such that at the present time a fourth of the land of England and Wales is in the hands of less than a thousand persons, while owing to the existence of the system, farmers are unable to compete either with the farmers or with the small land proprietors of the Continent, the result of which is that the farmers of England have fallen into a very bad condition, and the labourers, notwithstanding their increased wages, are relatively little better off than they were before. The effect of this is to reduce the productiveness of the land." He quoted Sir John B. Lawes, as stating, in a speech at Berwick, that the "soil of this country can produce far more wheat and meat for the support of the population than it does—if not, indeed, all that is required to support the population." He went on to say: "During the past ten years labour on the farms has diminished in the majority of cases to only a fourth or half the number of men; the production having decreased in like proportion. The last census shows that the rural population had extensively decreased in almost every parish throughout the country. The number of paupers, however, has not decreased, which shows that a spasmodic increase of prosperity in trade is not a true index of the general welfare of the country. What is to become of the labourers thus squeezed

off the land?" he asked. "Some—and a considerable number—have emigrated, and political economists say they have become our best customers because they are cultivating the waste lands of Queensland and Canada. Surely, however, they would have been as good customers if allowed to remain here and to cultivate the waste lands of, say, Devonshire or Warwickshire! What will our wealth do for us if we get rid of the very backbone of our country, which these men are? Others migrate to the towns, where the competition for the means of sustaining life becomes proportionately keener, and where they are obliged to herd together in masses, and ultimately—by the displacement of others who have grown old and are less able to labour—to increase the list of paupers. My proposal, generally, means occupying ownership. According to an eminent writer, peasant proprietary is an art. As far as England is concerned, it is a lost art. It is the art of living and saving on a small farm and making the land produce more by the superior industry and care of the man who is the proprietor of it. There is plenty of land in the market; but who are the buyers? There are landowners, capitalists—almost anybody but the cultivator. The fact is, the cultivator, as a rule, has not the money, and while land is bought, not for the primary object of cultivation and production, but as an element of social distinction and importance, there will always be higher prices given for it. That

brings me to the last point in my resolution, namely, that the State should assist certain classes in the purchase of land. In other words, *my remedy for the ills of the country is to create a peasant proprietary system.* That principle is not new. It has been carried out in the Church Act of 1869. It was carried out by Stein in Prussia, and the principle has lately been advocated—for Ireland—by the noble lord the Member for Middlesex (Lord George Hamilton)". Mr. Collings proposed that a fourth of the purchase money payable by a would-be cultivator should be put down at the time of purchase, the remainder of the money being lent to him by the State. In later years he eliminated this fourth altogether. At the time with which we are dealing, he also advocated that "a piece of ground should be allotted to every school where the children might learn the art of raising vegetables and acquire a love for the soil, which policy will keep them in the rural districts." This was the real beginning of his Agricultural Education Bill, to which reference will be made in subsequent pages. He concluded by quoting several instances of occupying owners who had greatly increased the production of their farms since they became owners.

Viscount Lymington seconded the motion, and during his remarks a second attempt was made, again unsuccessfully, to count out the House! On a third attempt the House was actually counted out! It is surely not unfair to say that this shows the

interest—or lack of interest—which Mr. Gladstone and the party in power at the period mentioned had in a subject which, from this time onwards, became one uppermost in a large part of the public mind, and which if it had been put into practical operation on an extensive scale in the course of the next few years, would have allayed in this country some of the grave anxieties which afflicted us all in regard to the national food supply during the time of the war 1914 to 1918.

We may sum up this subject by stating what the labourers thought of the speech and the motion referred to, and for this purpose it is best—and will serve a useful and historical purpose—to quote what their official organ said at the time, which is as follows :

“ What is the real practical value of peasant proprietary? Is it a workable scheme, and is its adoption likely to be attended with public benefit? These are the crucial points. Firstly, as to the principle of a State loan. There can surely be no objection to this if the purpose be the public advantage. Over and over again has the State advanced funds for the public good. There was a loan to the English landlords after the abolition of the Corn Laws. There have been numerous loans to the Irish, and there is now an agitation on foot for State-aided emigration. Then as to the desirableness of the object. We say advisedly that there is an overwhelming amount of evidence in favour of



peasant proprietary. Dr. Ireland, in his *Studies of a Wandering Observer*, states that at Die, in France, a small town of 4000 inhabitants, there are 500 proprietors of land ranging from two and a half acres upwards. The result is that the proprietors are gradually becoming richer, and in from fifteen to twenty years a frugal family generally manages to put by £500 or £600. Mr. Thornton says of Guernsey that not even in England is there nearly so large a quantity of produce sent to market from a tract of such limited extent. Mr. Hill says this is the happiest community it has ever been his lot to fall in with ; and Sir George Head affirms that in whatever direction the traveller wends his way comfort everywhere prevails. Mr. Broderick reports that in Jersey a much larger quantity of food is raised on an equal area than in any part of the United Kingdom. In the Western Pyrenees, where the small farm system also prevails, Mr. Arthur Young reports that 'an air of neatness, warmth, and comfort breathes over the whole' ; while in Saxony, Mr. Kay says, 'Since the peasants became the proprietors of the land there has been a rapid and continued improvement in the condition of the houses, in the manner of living, in the dress of the peasants, and particularly in the culture of the land' ; and the same writer adds, 'The peasant farming of Prussia, Saxony, Holland, and Switzerland is the most perfect farming I have ever witnessed.'

“ These are the results in countries where peasant proprietary exists under fair and untrammelled conditions, where it is fostered by the State and flourishes in circumstances favourable to its full and natural development. And why should the system fail in England? We believe there is no just ground to apprehend such a result. On the contrary, it would prove an unqualified success. It would benefit the country, and in no wise injure the landlords. But at present the movement has to battle with prejudice; which we trust will pass away when its merits are better known, and its real objects more closely comprehended.”

The impetus given to the movement for the provision of allotments by the passing of the Allotments Extension Act, 1882, involved Mr. Collings in such an enormous amount of correspondence, etc., that he now felt it was absolutely necessary to form an association to deal specially with it. He therefore formally, in August, 1883, issued a circular pointing out the advantages to the labourer of a plot of ground to cultivate during his spare hours, the necessity for making the measure alluded to known, and the equal necessity for seeing that it was carried into effect. This circular, together with a letter from himself, was sent extensively throughout the country seeking funds with which to carry on the Association.

There was a gratifying response, and a meeting of subscribers was thereupon held at Birmingham on December 6th, 1883. At this meeting the

Allotments Extension Association was formed, and Mr. Collings was elected as its first president. A public meeting was held in the evening, when addresses were given by Mr. Collings, Mr. H. Broadhurst, M.P., Alderman J. Chamberlain, the Rev. C. Stubbs (Vicar of Grandborough, Bucks), Mr. George Goss (a Suffolk tenant farmer), and Mr. George Phillips (an agricultural labourer). Working men were invited to attend the meeting "to support your agricultural brethren in their efforts to secure the rights which recent legislation has given to them." At this gathering the following resolution was proposed by the Rev. C. Stubbs, and adopted, namely: "That this meeting recognises the advantages to the labourers in rural districts of a plot of land to cultivate during their spare time, the possession of such plot in many instances being the only means by which they can secure sufficient food for themselves and their family." In supporting this resolution, Mr. G. Phillips, the agricultural labourer referred to, declared: "Once give the labourer a stake in the soil and he will become an independent citizen, but keep him without it and he becomes a serf and a pauper." Thus began a definite movement in the way of organisation for land reform, a movement in no way complicated by extraneous subjects. This eventuated in the Rural Labourers' League—and later the Rural League—as the subsequent pages will show.

Following up his parliamentary advocacy, Mr.

Collings addressed various public meetings this year dealing with the franchise and the deplorable condition of the agricultural workers. Addressing a crowded meeting at Plymouth he said :

“ Does anybody here know what the life of the agricultural labourer is ? Has anyone ever been behind him when he has gone home from work on a winter’s night ? He goes home at night, perhaps, after being ankle deep in the ditch ; he goes home by starlight and returns to work by starlight. You will find his hands crooked by rheumatism, working on to the very verge of the grave, because he fears to go to the workhouse. But he fails at last, and then goes into the workhouse, and there is his master, who is among those who are called his Guardians. Very kind, no doubt, his master will appear to him for a time, but ultimately the end comes, and one day it will be reported that the man is dead. The parish coffin, and the parish gravedigger are called into requisition, and the pauper is placed into six feet of earth—the only six feet of ground he has ever possessed in his life. His has been a life of privation, of toil—a hopeless life, with an horizon only bounded by the workhouse and by the grave. If the resources of civilisation are exhausted for him, the fact is pitiable indeed. At present the labourer is not represented in Parliament. He has no vote, no voice in the representation of his country, no more than the horse he drives, but he expects it

from men in town. You in the Three Towns have a great duty pressing upon you in this respect, and I ask you to be true to your order."

There was an ineradicable idea even in the minds of economists that the agricultural labourers really were very comfortably off. Dr. Giffen, the eminent statistician, for instance, in a letter to the Press, dated October 23rd, 1883, said that "the whole of the great material improvement of the last fifty years had gone to the masses." Mr. Collings challenged this statement so far as it referred to agricultural labourers. He pointed out that not only had the labourer's position not improved, but that if anything it had become more poignant; and he went on to declare that "the real era of prosperity to the labourer—the one described by several able writers as a time of 'comparative opulence' and of 'rude abundance'—was a time when he possessed land and enjoyed rights over the common and waste lands of the country." The appropriation of their land, he added, and the destruction of their rights had "reduced the labourers to a condition of serfdom."

At the time that Mr. Collings was making these statements an Oxfordshire landowner bravely confirmed everything he said, and remarked that he (the landowner) knew in a certain village seventeen families on the verge of starvation, whilst there were 100 acres of land near by covered with weeds and

lying idle—further testimony from a source (the landlord source) which, as the subsequent years passed by, became favourable to the claims of the farm workers as regards their desire to occupy and own land.

At Ipswich in this year Mr. Collings expressed with some significance to his constituents his views on politics. He declared: "Next to religion—indeed I hardly put it next because it is such a sacred thing—the highest and noblest thing is the science of politics. One thing I can always do as long as I have health and strength, and that is to preach what I believe to be right. If it is not in Parliament it will be out of it. Personally I have tastes, and a home, and a desire for leisure which would make me prefer not to be cooped up in Parliament all night long, wasting one's time as we sometimes do. However, there is work to be done; and if a man will be in earnest about it, and be faithful to his highest thoughts regardless of any consequences, he will at least succeed in one thing—he will bring questions before the people and rouse their life and interest, however much they may disagree with him."

Has any man ever been more "faithful" to a cause than has Mr. Collings? In a speech delivered at Bristol a couple of months later he added on the same theme: "The science of government is not to go about the world making wars, but to look into every cottage and into the condition of every

Englishman, and see what can be done to better the same, and to bring the people into that condition which we know they ought to enjoy. That will be brought about not by violence but by the discovery and by the practice of just laws."

## CHAPTER XXI

### FRANCHISE AGAIN: A PEASANT PROPRIETARY: "THREE ACRES AND A COW": MIGRATION AND EMIGRATION

1884-85. The agitation for the extension of the franchise to the agricultural labourers was now rapidly gathering force, and Mr. Collings put all his spirit and energy into it, speaking much throughout the country. The Bill, in fact, for securing it came on in the House of Commons on March 24th, 1884, and during its discussion he remarked, amidst laughter, that "the way to teach a man how to use a responsibility is to give him that responsibility. The labourer can never know the full responsibility of his vote until he gets it. The real question is, what right have you to judge or pretend to judge of the feelings of any other man to exercise the right of citizenship? (Hear, hear.) Besides, why ask a man to pay taxes when you do not allow him to vote? (Cheers.) Give the man the vote, and you will find that his material and social condition will be greatly altered and ameliorated. No power on earth can now prevent the extension of the franchise to the rural districts. It has been said that it is a



tremendous thing to give the franchise to 2,000,000 of the people ; but it is a still more tremendous thing to withhold it from them."

He asked, " Is it not better to govern the country by ballot boxes rather than by bayonets ? " (This was said in reply to an honourable member who deprecated giving the vote to " 500,000 Irish labourers.") Again, he said, " The Franchise Bill is a measure which is buoyant and will swim." Further, " Over 414 meetings were recorded in the official organ of the National Agricultural Labourers' Union in January and February, 1884, in favour of the Bill."

When, however, the Franchise Bill was in August, 1884, rejected by the House of Lords, the country was fired with indignation. Great and historic demonstrations to protest against the rejection took place all over the country. Mr. Collings attended four of the most important of these demonstrations, namely, at Leamington, in London (at Hyde Park), at Birmingham, and at Stoke. At each of these demonstrations there were large attendances of agricultural labourers, over 4000 from the Kent and Sussex Union of Labourers being present at Hyde Park. The *Daily News*, in commenting on this fact, remarked that " a considerable proportion of the gathering were clearly up from the country—men who carried sturdy fresh-cut walking-sticks, and who did not show the remotest affectation of the ways of town life." Mr. Collings spoke at each of

the gatherings, and strong resolutions were adopted. It will be sufficient, perhaps, to give the resolution passed at Leamington as typical of the others. It was as follows :

“ That this meeting of unenfranchised artisans and agricultural labourers indignantly repudiates the unfounded charge of indifference to the suffrage which has been brought against their class by those who are striving to debar from the rights of Englishmen 2,000,000 of their fellow-citizens ; and hereby tenders its enthusiastic support to the Government which has introduced the present wise, just, and beneficial measure of parliamentary reform.”

It is only right to say that the Bill was ultimately carried with the goodwill of both the great political parties. The Conservatives resisted Mr. Gladstone's attempt to carry a great extension of the Franchise before he had disclosed his scheme of redistribution and the Bill was thrown out by the House of Lords, as already stated, in August, 1884. After a conference of Mr. Gladstone with Lord Salisbury, to whom the whole scheme was confided, an agreement was reached and the Bill was passed in the autumn Session ; whilst in the following Session (1885) the Redistribution of Seats Act was passed, the agricultural labourers voting for the first time at the General Election which took place in November, 1885.

To make the franchise more effective, Mr. Collings introduced a Bill—called the Medical Relief Bill—in June, 1885 so as to remove the disqualification

to vote by labourers who had received medical relief at the expense of the parish.

This Bill, which consisted of a single clause, passed its First Reading, and was down for Second Reading, but the Government, who had previously assented to the Bill, declined to carry out their promise to support it, on the ground that they were going to introduce a Bill of their own.

Writing on the matter on July 21st, 1885, Mr. Collings said that "unless this Bill immediately becomes law a large number of the labouring classes, especially in the rural districts, will be deprived of their right to vote at the coming elections,<sup>1</sup> solely because they are poor. The men who have waited so long and patiently for the franchise will have the bitter disappointment of finding that the right which has been recently won for them is, by no fault of their own, taken away by a side wind. Poverty will thus be treated as a crime, to be punished by the loss of the rights of citizenship. It is difficult to follow the reasoning by which this great injustice is sought to be justified."

His fears were justified, for, after taking up the Bill in circumstances that gave them little credit, the Government, as already stated, dropped it. Before they dropped it, however, an amusing discussion took place as to what constituted "medical relief." The Government insisted on the term being limited to medical compounds, and Mr. Collings

<sup>1</sup> November, 1885.

insisted on its including nourishing food. As the *Labourers' Chronicle* remarked at the time: "Mr. Collings insisted that the words 'medical relief' should mean 'mutton chop' as well as 'jalap'; while the Government clung to the 'jalap' but refused the chop. Mr. Collings divided the House, and 'mutton chop' won by a good round majority of fifty votes." When the Government dropped the Bill, Mr. Collings again took possession of it. In the end the Bill was passed; "and for its benefits, which are both sound and substantial," said the newspaper in question, "the labourers are deeply indebted to Mr. Jesse Collings." The Bill was passed in time to enable the labourers to vote in the coming General Election (November, 1885).

In December, 1884, and again in March, 1885, Mr. Collings formally placed his legislative ideas on the establishment of a peasant proprietary in a measure entitled "The Peasant Proprietary and Acquisition of Land by Occupiers Bill," which he introduced in the months named. The Bill was backed by Mr. Robert Reid, Mr. George Palmer, Mr. Burt, and Mr. Broadhurst (the last two being labour members). "It is an attempt," truly said a contemporary, "to revive the fortunes of agriculture and to increase the wealth of the soil by creating a peasant proprietary and restoring the yeomanry class of cultivating owners."

There were, of course, at once numerous opponents of the Bill, mainly belonging to the propertied and

farming classes, but Mr. Collings pointed out to them that he was advocating the rights of property. "No one," he said, "believes in that more than I do." Again, "I want the property of all to be respected, the rights of the poor and humble as well as the rich and powerful," he remarked. "What is it in France that prevents communism and revolutionary and other doctrines from spreading outside Paris, Marseilles, and Lyons? It is because the moment those doctrines leave the towns they are preached to 8,000,000 of proprietors and fall upon deaf ears. But in England the proletariat—the wage-receiving class—has reached a number that exists in no other country, whilst the property-owning class is small in number." When Mr. Collings said, "has reached a number that exists in no other country," he meant the comparison between urban and rural workers has reached a number in our land that exists in no other. The Bill made no progress in Parliament during the year, though it was much discussed in the provinces.

It was in a speech in support of the Bill referred to that Mr. Collings uttered the expression "Three Acres and a Cow," which subsequently<sup>1</sup>—and especially in the months leading up to the General Election of 1885—attracted so much notice. The remark was not an original one. Among others—as he himself has pointed out—Jeremy Bentham in his *Political Economy* refers to "two and a half acres

<sup>1</sup> At Cirencester, Warminster, and elsewhere.

and a cow," and the author of the *History of Kent* deals with "Three Acres and a Cow."

Mr. Chamberlain went with Mr. Collings this year (1885) to the parish of West Lavington, Wiltshire, to see how the labourers lived and worked, and what they desired for the amelioration of their conditions. It was a private visit, but as soon as it became known in the district that they were there a crowd of labourers congregated at the house of their host (Mr. Wm. Saunders), and Mr. Chamberlain was asked to give a short address. He consented to do so if some of the labourers would speak first. Three of the labourers were selected by their fellow-workers to do this. The burden of their remarks was the hardship of their lot and the hopelessness of their lives. They were keenly sensitive of these conditions, far more so than was commonly supposed, and they had in them an understanding of what was required to raise them to a higher standard of life. They told Mr. Chamberlain that their possible improvement was (1) in the better cultivation of the land, and (2) in enabling them to obtain bits of land on their own account.

Mr. Chamberlain in his reply said that "there was a time when some people thought it was enough if an agricultural labourer knew how to read a signpost. I want men to have facilities to obtain the best education that is possible for them, rich and poor alike; and that, being for the benefit, not of an individual merely, but of the whole community,

the community must pay for it. The remedy for the improvement of the labourers' condition is in the direction of the land laws. . . . We want to multiply the number of small owners ; and it is in that direction you will find safety."

Mr. Collings asked, in a letter to *The Times* in November, 1885, what would be said if those in the iron and cotton trade had their books laden with orders at paying prices, had abundance of labour and raw material at their command, but were running their engines at half stroke, and failing from one cause or another to supply the demand ? " Yet this is precisely the position," he added, " in which the agricultural industry of the country is at the present time. All trade must be governed more or less by the production of the soil at home and abroad ; and our commercial classes recognise this by their anxiety to open up fresh markets. While anxious, however, as to the purchasing power of our colonies, Central Africa, and other foreign regions, they seem to overlook the decline of the purchasing power of Devon, Dorset, and of our own country generally. If a few steam engines or iron girders are brought from Belgium an alarm is raised, newspapers record the fact, and Chambers of Commerce discuss it as a serious matter ; but no uneasiness is felt at the importation, say, of cheese to the extent of nearly five million sterling in a single year, though this country is quite as well fitted for the production of

cheese as it is for the manufacture of steam engines and girders."

Education has a direct bearing on the better cultivation of the land, and in another letter in the same month to *The Times* he again pointed out that technical education was as much needed for the rural labourer as for the town artisan, and that to complete land reform the teaching of agriculture should be made a compulsory subject in the schools of our villages and small rural towns. "Not only scientific instruction," he said, "but its practical application should be insisted on. The extra cost would be so small as to be scarcely worth consideration. The expense of this teaching might be to a large extent defrayed by the endowments, etc., which the Charity Commissioners, by a policy of confiscation, are largely diverting from the uses of the poor by schemes framed mainly in the interest of the middle and leisured classes. A piece of land, say half an acre to an acre, should be attached to each school. The subjects taught should include those of pruning, grafting, fruit, flower, and vegetable growing, quality and selection of seeds, and garden work generally, properties and preparation of soils, manuring, draining, etc."

Whilst the land of our own country remained in such a bad condition and was capable of such vast improvement from the point of view of production, Mr. Collings would not listen to the remedy frequently advanced that the best means of improving



the condition of our agricultural labourers was for them to migrate to the towns or to go overseas. Such a movement, however, was in progress, for the reason that Parliament was so slow in adopting proposals for the development of our land. Mr. Collings regarded it as deplorable and disastrous.

Speaking at Warminster in this year, he said : " Where have the people gone ? Into our large towns, creating evils such as every Englishman should blush to contemplate. The working men of our towns have had their wages kept down by the competition of men who came in from the country, and who ought to be employed on the land. How will you be able to stay on the land ? You must have an open career provided for you upon it. They say the land will not produce now : has it lost its character ? Take one article : how is it we buy every year £5,000,000 worth of cheese from the foreigner ? Can England not produce this ? How is it we purchase from £12,000,000 to £14,000,000 worth of butter ? Is England not a butter-producing country ? A sum of £30,000,000 to £40,000,000 annually goes out of the country which might be realised at home. Let me tell rural shopkeepers and our villagers that if our rural life was restored and the food we require produced on our own land there would be work for the labourer, custom for the shopkeeper, business for the manufacturer, and so on. You have the labour, and you have the land ; and yet we have to send across to Belgium, Denmark,

etc., to smallholders there, to buy the commonest articles of food."

Again, at Burton, he said: "Migration is the favoured remedy of those who do not like to face the land question. We ought to weep over such a spectacle. We ought to be up in arms about it. But the worst feature of it is that there is a continual influx into the towns; and, instead of being on the land creating wealth, these people come and aid in producing that which their absence from the land has lessened the demand for. This is a most serious working-man's question, which neither strikes nor Trades Unions can settle."

He repeatedly challenged those who spoke or wrote in favour of the migration of our rural people. In reply to one of these correspondents, he reminded him "that there is something else besides a money question involved; and that the condition of the people as an element in our national safety has to be considered." Some of the correspondents could not appreciate the difference between "a closed manufactory and an uncultivated field." To these Mr. Collings pointed out that the manufactory was closed for want of work, while the field need not be uncultivated, but if allied to labour would create wealth and the consequent demand for manufactures. "Indeed," he added, "it is only by cultivating the field that you can open the manufactory; for it must be taken as a fact that trade and commerce are governed by the various productions of

the land both here and elsewhere." He also pointed out that "the standard of welfare of the large family we call the nation should be not so much the amount of its aggregate money wealth, but the moral, material, and social condition of the great mass of its members."

## CHAPTER XXII

### LORD SALISBURY, MR. GLADSTONE, AND THE FARM LABOURERS

1886-87. In 1886 Lord Salisbury and his party were returned to power. Before Parliament opened, Mr. Chamberlain declared : " I do not think this Parliament is likely to be a very long one " ; and it was on an Amendment which on 26th January in that year Mr. Collings moved to the Address that the Government was defeated and thereupon resigned. This Amendment was popularly known as the " Three Acres and a Cow Amendment," and it showed that the extension of the franchise had had a very powerful effect, not only on the public mind, but on the minds of those who were dependent to some extent at least for their votes on the rural people.

The speech from the Throne was delivered on 21st January. Mr. Collings' Amendment was in the following terms :

" But this House humbly expresses its regret that no measures are announced by Her Majesty for the present relief of those classes, and especially for affording facilities to the agricultural labourers and others in the rural districts to obtain allotments

and small holdings on equitable terms as to rent and security of tenure."

In the course of his remarks, Mr. Collings observed that it was said farmers could not afford to employ labour, but he added that certainly they could not afford to farm without labour. He went on to say : " All the discussion which hangs on what is called ' three acres and a cow ' simply means that the labourer is anxious to get some interest in the soil he cultivates. The labourer does not suppose he is going to get something for nothing, he is not such a fool ; but he wishes to have access to the three acres, and then the cow and many other things will follow to the thrifty, industrious worker." It was said that the supply of these holdings might be left to voluntary associations, but he remarked that " what I want is something to go beyond that, in case it is not done voluntarily." Again, " there is nothing new in my proposals from what has been brought forward since the time of Elizabeth, except the compulsion where it is needed, and that compulsion will not be carried out where the supply of land is sufficient. We are told that nothing can be done, as the price of corn is so low. If we put corn out of the question, there is still plenty of scope. There is, for instance, butter, which in my younger days used to sell at 7d. per lb., and which is now double the price ; poultry, which we used to sell at 1s. 1d. a head, and is now 2s. 6d. a head ; cheese, pork,

vegetables, and other small articles of food, all requiring that minute industry which the large farmer cannot well give, but which a peasant proprietor can well bestow—all these things are imported to this country to the value in the aggregate of 50 millions sterling. I want to know why such food is not produced at home. We have in this country what prevails nowhere else that I know of—a landless peasantry. The agricultural labourers have been reduced by legislation from the position of having an independent interest in the land to that of mere hirelings. They have been forced into the towns, and thus we have a proletariat in this country such as does not exist anywhere else that I am aware of in Europe. I am horrified that the territorial party cannot see the danger that attaches to their present position—a danger from the effects of which the measure I propose will save them. If they resist that measure they will go farther and fare worse."

The Amendment was seconded by Captain Verney. Mr. Chaplin (now Viscount Chaplin), who has since come round to Mr. Collings' views on the question of small occupying ownerships, and has lately written him in generous terms to that effect, opposed the Amendment on behalf of the Government.

Mr. Gladstone followed, and stated that the point of Mr. Collings' Amendment was not, as had been urged, the general depression of trade or agriculture, but the duty which he thought to be incumbent upon the Government and the House, and the

assurances which he thought it right to give to the agricultural labourer respecting that duty as to adopting special measures in the rural districts to obtain allotments and small holdings on equitable terms as to rent and security of tenure. He proceeded to say he was sorry to hear Mr. Chaplin condemn the system of the small proprietary class, as he believed that if they were able to argue the matter, a totally different colour would be given to it. With regard to the French small proprietors, he pointed out that between the periods immediately succeeding the peace of 1815 and the year 1867, when he himself had in Paris intercourse with the greatest economists of that country, the increase in the taxable agricultural value of France in that period was very considerable, and greater than the corresponding increase in the same period in the three kingdoms under the rule of Her Majesty. He said it was painful and grievous to witness the almost entire divorce between the labouring rural population and the land of the country in which they live. He continued: "It is time and it is requisite for the House to consider whether they will give an indication of their feelings in that respect. The mover of the Amendment (Mr. Jesse Collings) has addressed the House with much intelligence and much moderation. He has also addressed the House with fairness. To restore to the old local communities of this country something of that character of a community, in which the common interests of the

individual labourer may be so managed as to associate him with the soil in a manner much more effectual than that by which he is associated with it at the present—these I take to be views which we ought to thank my honourable friend for having laid before the House ; and I heartily hope we shall adopt his Amendment by a large majority.”

The next speaker was Mr. Finch Hatton, who, while admitting that “ for more than one hundred years his family had granted allotments and had found the system to succeed,” yet announced that he would be obliged to vote against the Amendment.

Mr. Heneage (now Lord Heneage) pointed out that a system of allotments is “ advantageous to the landlord, because it keeps tenants upon an estate.” He believed “ not only that the most desirable allotment for a labourer is a garden adjacent to his house, but that it is very important there should be in every parish a certain number of cow cottages.” He announced that he should vote for the Amendment.

Mr. Arch, now in Parliament, then rose to make his maiden speech, and he had an encouraging reception. His remarks were directed at the alleviation of the poverty of the agricultural labouring class. He remarked that the question under discussion went altogether out of the region of party politics. “ It was not a landlord’s question, it was not a tenant farmer’s question, it was not a labourer’s question, it was the question of the people, and they would



very soon make it their question." He informed the House that "though the lives of agricultural labourers were lives of poverty, though they were born in humble cottages, yet at the same time they looked upon themselves as men"; and he appealed to the House to assist in redressing their grievances, "to dry their tears, wipe away their sorrows, and place them in the position of free men."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> It will interest readers to know that Mr. Collings considers Mr. Arch's subsequent career in the House of Commons was "quite a failure." There was, he has often told me, "a grand opening in Parliament for independent action by Mr. Arch in favour of the rural labourers"; but elected for N.W. Norfolk in 1885, he very soon (in 1886-7 and onwards) gave himself, as Mr. Collings with deep regret has declared to me, completely over to Irish Home Rule and mere party politics. It is certain that he neither introduced nor propounded any Bill or policy in Parliament after getting there on behalf of the class from which he sprang, and on behalf of which, outside of Parliament, he had done noble work, as both these pages and the pages of "Land Reform" make abundantly clear. He was born at Barford, Warwickshire, November 10, 1826, contested and lost the Wilton parliamentary constituency in 1880, was returned as a County Councillor for the Wellesbourne division of Warwickshire in 1888, and died in 1918.

The ultimate failure of Mr. Arch's National Agricultural Labourers' Union, started with so much enthusiasm and hopefulness—and which took place several years after Mr. Collings severed himself from it in the eighties of the nineteenth century—arose from a suspicion among the members that the funds were being misappropriated. It was mismanagement and not misappropriation on the part of the officials that caused that suspicion. On several occasions the money of the Union had been used for purposes other than those for which it was really intended to be used, and when on this account the Union was unable to pay out to sick members the benefits for which they had paid, a death-blow was given to it. A Sick Benefit Society was started in 1877. It ought, in Mr. Collings'

Mr. Goschen, in a long speech, chose to believe that land reform had been suddenly raised from an item in what he called the "Unauthorised Programme" at the then recent Election to an "Authorised item since the Election." He said that "while it is absolutely certain that the extension of the system of allotments would be of vast advantage to the community, the question as regards small holdings is not so decided." "See what a danger we are incurring when we embark on the question on the ground of right," he went on. "Is it not certain that the artisans in the towns will follow out this concession as to right, and will say you must regulate the rents of our tenements on the same principle as you regulate those of the agricultural labourer?"

Mr. Bradlaugh, who followed Mr. Goschen, adduced the fact that "in 1871, when the great French loan was contracted, it was nearly all subscribed for opinion, never to have been started, and Mr. Arch was warned not to start it. But worse happened when the funds from this Society were used for strikes and other purposes. The Trustees, of whom Mr. Collings was one, protested against the funds being thus used, and for a time they refused to advance the money; but they found they were compelled by law to pay whatever the Executive Committee demanded. Mr. Collings therefore declined any further responsibility and resigned, and the other Trustees did the same. Thousands of poor fellows who paid into this Sick Benefit Society for years, found afterwards, when the time of need came, there was no money available for them. It was this which caused the labourers to back out of the Union, and I can testify to the fact.

The following are the available figures showing the number of members of the Union which was "formed" officially (i.e. from a

by the French peasantry, who have been pictured to-night as being in exceeding misery on their small holdings."

Mr. Walter Long avowed himself "a cordial approver of the system of allotments and even of small holdings."

Mr. Arthur Balfour, who opposed the Motion, generally entered into subtle argument against it.

Mr. Chamberlain made a powerful speech in support of the Motion.

Sir M. Hicks-Beach opposed it on the ground that it was brought forward "to turn the present Conservative Government out of office."

The Marquis of Hartington said he had always declared that provision for allotments and possibly for small holdings to be occupied by the labouring classes, or by a small class of tenant farmers, was

Government point of view) in 1874, and was officially dissolved on the 30th of September, 1897 :—

<i>Year</i>	<i>No. of Members.</i>	<i>Year.</i>	<i>No. of Members.</i>
1874	.. 86,214	1886	.. 10,300
1875	.. 58,652	1887	.. 5,300
1876	.. 55,000	1888	.. 4,660
1877	.. 30,000	1889	.. 4,254
1878	.. 24,000	1890	.. 14,000
1879	.. 20,000	1891	.. 15,000
1880	.. 20,000	1892	.. 15,000
1881	.. 15,000	1893	.. 14,000
1882	.. (not stated)	1894	.. 1,000
1883	.. (not stated)	1895	.. (not stated)
1884	.. 18,000	1896	.. (not stated)
1885	.. 10,366	1897	.. (not stated)

All official records as to the balance-sheets of the Union have been destroyed ; though why it has been impossible to discover.

an object very much to be desired. At the same time he desired that object to be accomplished by natural and self-acting means, and the operation of those natural causes should be free from restraint. He objected to the Motion because no details were given of the measure by which the principles were to be carried out.

The House then divided, when the numbers were :

For the Motion	.	329
Against	.	250
		<hr/>
Majority	.	79

The defeat of the Government caused a great sensation. Mr. Collings was at once the recipient of congratulations from all over the country, and of some abuse, the latter even from members of his own party. He was, however, especially pleased at the passing of the Motion because it placed the question of the agricultural labourers' condition in the forefront of the numerous social questions of the day. An analysis of the voting showed that the majority was composed of 255 Liberals and 74 Irish Nationalist members, the minority comprising 232 Conservatives and 18 Liberals.

The Conservative Government, after their defeat, resigned, and Mr. Gladstone was returned to power. Mr. Collings immediately (1886) introduced his Allotments and Small Holdings Bill, the object of which was not only to enable men to secure allotments and small holdings, but to become the proprietors

of the latter by means of loans advanced to them for the purpose by the local authorities through whom they obtained the holdings. The *Daily News* in a leading article on this measure, while remarking that "it is not, of course, a Government Bill," pointedly observed also that "it embodies the substance of the Amendment which proved fatal to the administration of Lord Salisbury."

Unfortunately, Mr. Gladstone, instead of taking up this question of land reform which had been one of the principal planks of his platform and of that of the Liberal party during the Election which returned him and his followers to power, chose to introduce a Home Rule Bill, and Mr. Collings opposed it and him. He (Mr. Collings) felt so strongly on this, as he called it, desertion of the cause of the agricultural workers that he addressed a manifesto to them, and it was published broadcast. He stated : "The present (Liberal) Parliament was elected a few months ago, and so far as your votes were given, it was elected to carry out long-delayed legislation for the benefit of the industrial classes, and especially for the betterment of the condition of the rural labourers. The present (Liberal) ministry was placed in power with the distinct mandate that they were to proceed with legislation to meet the wants of the labourers in regard to the land. These reforms, to which the Government were pledged, have been, however, unjustly postponed or put aside altogether in order to bring forward a scheme for the govern-

ment of Ireland." He appealed to them, on this account, to support the Liberal-Unionist party, which was favourable to his policy of rural reform and which had just been formed from among the ranks of those Liberals who disagreed with Mr. Gladstone's Irish policy. He felt the more strongly about the matter because, at the time Mr. Gladstone introduced his Home Rule Bill, Mr. Chamberlain, President of the Local Government Board, was prepared to bring forward a Bill for reform in local government, which would have brought the labourers into closer connection with the land. This was thwarted for a Bill and a policy which had not been before the electors.<sup>1</sup>

Mr. Gladstone, however,—whose attitude in deserting the rural workers Mr. Collings has never been able to regard otherwise than with deep regret and surprise—unable to secure a majority in Parliament for his Irish Home Rule proposals, resigned, whereupon Lord Salisbury once more came back to power.

The effect of the split in the Liberal Party which followed the introduction of the Home Rule Bill, with the corresponding prominence which was given to the land question in England, led to the principle underlying the creation of a peasant proprietary now being accepted by all parties in the State.

In the July and August of 1886, Mr. Collings went on a holiday to Switzerland. He much enjoyed the

<sup>1</sup> Mr. Collings was Parliamentary Secretary of the Local Government Board at this time.

change from the recent turmoils in Parliament, and came back much refreshed for the heavy and anxious work before him.

He now decided to separate the question of allotments from small holdings, and therefore, in 1887, he introduced two Bills : one for the provision of allotments and one for the creation of freehold small holdings. An Allotments Bill—based on his own measure and embodying the principle of compulsion—was thereupon brought in by the Government and passed. This enabled as much as an acre of land to be set apart for each individual labourer willing and able to cultivate it.

In the same year the Allotments and Cottage Gardens (Compensation for Crops) Act was passed. Sir Edward Birkbeck, Member for East Norfolk, brought it in, and Mr. Collings supported it, as the claims of the poor man to compensation for his unexhausted manures and other improvements had been hitherto left completely out of consideration, whilst farmers, when they left their holdings, had at least compensation of a sort provided for them.

As a relaxation and also for the purposes of information, Mr. Collings went with Mr. Chamberlain on a tour through the islands and Highlands of Scotland during the recess.

On the evening of their arrival at Ayr they attended a public meeting at the Town Hall, where above 2000 persons were assembled. On leaving Ayr, they went to Edinburgh, and thither to Inver-

ness and Dingwall, receiving numerous addresses from local associations *en route*. They left the train at a small station near Dingwall, where they were met by Mr. John Maclenan, President of the Highland Land Reform Association ; by Mr. Adam, a large farmer, and others. They then drove through a large crofting district, and inquired into several cases of alleged injustice to crofters. At Dingwall Mr. Chamberlain was presented with the freedom of "the royal and ancient Burg." The people appeared to be delighted at the visit, and urged that this personal examination of the bad state in which the crofter population lived would lead to reform. Mr. Chamberlain and Mr. Collings then crossed to the Island of Lewis, and at Stornoway they had an enthusiastic reception. At a small place called Bayble, on the coast, they addressed an open-air meeting of crofters in a heavy downpour of rain. The people at this place struck Mr. Collings as being a fine, healthy, and strong race, worthy of being looked after for the good of the country. "We don't want emigration," they said, "but migration to the better parts of the island." At Shawbost—on the west of the island—Mr. Chamberlain and Mr. Collings received a delegation, who spoke very bitterly of their condition. They were told by several other deputations that waited on them that there were in Sutherlandshire and Ross-shire a million acres of land uncultivated, this area not including land unfit for cultivation.



At other places, during their journey, they heard stories of great wrongs and hardships suffered by the crofters. They sifted the evidence as carefully as they could, and it was confirmed by information they received from independent sources. If only one-tenth of it was correct, it indicated, as Mr. Collings observed at the time, a shameful state of things. The crofters in many cases had been cleared off land they had reclaimed, and the dwellings they had built had been demolished. The accounts of the evictions, removals to congested districts by the sea, destructions of dwellings, etc., were heartrending to the two visitors, and the accounts seemed to be confirmed by "the half-starved, wretched condition of the men, women, and children whom they saw huddled together in their wretched cabins."

The tour, which occupied some weeks, was a very interesting and instructive one. Mr. Collings, as he afterwards declared, learnt a great deal about the crofters at first hand.

## CHAPTER XXIII

### THE ALLOTMENTS AND SMALL HOLDINGS ASSOCIATION; AND THE RURAL LABOURERS' LEAGUE

1888. On the 15th of February, 1888, the annual meeting of the Allotments and Small Holdings Association (the name by which the Allotments Extension Association was now known) was held in the National Liberal Club, Whitehall, London, and it is necessary to refer in some detail to the proceedings at it, as in the sequel the result for the cause Mr. Collings espoused proved a blessing in disguise.

At this meeting, which was composed almost entirely of "Gladstonian" Liberals and Irish Nationalists, Mr. Collings was voted out of the Presidency. It was done in a manner which he thought was both unfair and discourteous, and in this view he was unquestionably right. The majority of the committee of the Association he formed were party politicians in favour of the policy of Home Rule recently propounded by Mr. Gladstone, and they and their sympathisers were apparently not willing to allow the Association to be kept free from party politics, which was Mr. Collings' wish, and which

certainly whilst he was connected with it was the policy he adopted.

At the annual meeting, therefore, after he had moved the adoption of the annual report (which was carried), and after a further resolution had also been carried, proposing the thanks of the Association to the officers and executive committee, Mr. (afterwards Sir John) Brunner, M.P., moved that the President for the ensuing year should be a gentleman other than Mr. Collings. This motion, of which Mr. Collings (although he was to be and was in the chair) had not been given the slightest previous knowledge, and upon which, therefore, he ventured to make some comments, stating that he had been treated with unpleasantness and discourtesy in committee (where he had been in a minority of one against four other active members who were of a different political colour), was carried, not, however, before the only labourer present—Mr. Reed of Berkhamstead—moved an amendment that Mr. Collings should retain the Presidency. For his own part, Mr. Collings did not mind at all (as he stated at the time) another being made President, but he did resent what he rightly stigmatised as the underhand method by which the motion to secure that end was brought about and carried.

It was next sought to place Mr. George Palmer—the then head of the well-known firm of Huntley and Palmer, of Reading—in the position of treasurer ; but that gentleman stated that if Mr. Collings left

the Presidency he would not serve. Nor did he do so. Another treasurer was then appointed, the motion to that effect being seconded by an Irish Nationalist member (Mr. Clancy, M.P.), who was not even a subscriber to the Association.

After this a new executive was appointed, all of them members of the Gladstonian Liberal party, and then a resolution of thanks to Mr. Collings for having acted as chairman was passed.

In reply, Mr. Collings stated, as well he might, that he felt it a novel position, "which he perfectly understood," and he added that the country would understand what it all meant—"being thanked while being kicked downstairs." He concluded by saying that he felt no ill-will against anyone, and he repeated what he had said before, namely that "he hoped the committee would not turn the Association into a Home Rule Association"; after which the proceedings terminated. As a fact, the Association did become a Home Rule association of a very pronounced kind, and in its subsequent years, as judged by its reports, it did very little work indeed for the agricultural labourers in comparison with that which it had been able previously to accomplish, or with that which Mr. Collings was afterwards able to accomplish through a new association known as the Rural Labourers' League, to which reference will be made presently. This latter is a matter upon which I am able to speak with special confidence.

The comments in the newspapers of friends and

even of some fair-minded political opponents in regard to the action above described by which the Presidency of the Association was changed were such as probably few self-respecting men would sustain with credit. Some of the more important persons at the meeting alluded to were, to their shame, those whom Mr. Collings had permitted to assist him—first of all in his own home, and then afterwards as members of the Association—in the work of carrying forward the allotments and small holdings movement. Others were Irish Nationalists and Gladstonian Liberal officials, such as Mr. F. Schnadhorst, their political secretary.

One of the more prominent supporters of these gentlemen, in a letter to the newspapers, suggested that Mr. Collings was voted from the Presidency of the Association because he had used it as an electioneering weapon. So far from this being true, Mr. Collings had repeatedly protested against the action of the Committee in such direction. Moreover, the sympathy or the impartial attitude which this advocate and his Irish Nationalist friends and others showed in securing the passing of the Conservative Government's Allotments Bill of 1887 may be judged from the fact that throughout its discussion their policy had been one of delay and obstruction, whilst on the very last day of the Bill being in Committee they had no less than fifteen pages of amendments on the Order Book. It was, in fact, only by the declaration of the Government to carry

the Bill at all cost, and by their determination to apply the "closure" to it if necessary, that the measure was passed into law.

The statement of one of these conscience-stricken gentlemen was again made that Mr. Collings was rejected not because of his views on Ireland, to which of course he had a perfect right, but because he had used his allotments movement for Tory political purposes. This was as inaccurate as all the others made by Mr. Collings' then opponents; and it is a little significant in connection with this particular point to remember that Sir Walter Foster (afterwards Lord Ilkeston) declared, during the course of the motion for the adoption of the annual report, "that the Association should be supported by either one or the other of the sections of the Liberal party, since at present it suffers greatly from the difference of opinions existing. I think it is only from the Gladstonian Liberal party and their leader that we can hope for any effective support." It is obvious, therefore, that whatever others may have thought their views on the point under notice were not shared by those who (like Sir Walter Foster—a Gladstonian Liberal) were more actively connected with the inside working of the Committee and the Association.

After all, however, Mr. Collings, as I have the best reason for stating, really felt some relief at leaving the Association, whose Committee were, as already stated, seeking to turn—and succeeded in turning—it into a mere party machine; and he received an

extraordinary number of letters both from agricultural labourers and others expressing not merely disapproval but indignation at the Association's action. He also received numerous requests that he should continue his work of assisting the agricultural labourers by starting a new organisation, to which he agreed.

The late Mr. W. E. Bear, a former editor of the *Mark Lane Express*, and an extremely able and honest man, writing in one of the daily papers on February 20th, 1888, on the subject of the Committee's action, said :

“ It would be difficult to imagine a more flagrant instance of ingratitude on the part of a body of educated men than the deposition of Mr. Jesse Collings as Chairman of the Allotments and Small Holdings Association. Not only was he the principal founder of the Association, but he has done more than all the other leaders of it together to promote its objects. By his zeal and persistency he has been instrumental in carrying through Parliament two Bills for facilitating the acquirement of allotments by farm labourers and other working men ; and he is still actively engaged in the endeavour to perfect the legislative arrangements for the realisation of his object. But the action of his colleagues is something more than a display of ingratitude ; it is an act of folly also. By it the Association in question has been transformed from an independent to a party society, so that none but Home Rulers can have

anything to do with it. Nor is this all, for the movement in favour of increasing the number of allotments is certain to be detrimentally affected by the partisan spirit introduced by Mr. Brunner and others, at whose instance Mr. Collings was deposed from his position simply and purely because he is a Unionist. The best for those to do who care more for the interests of the English farm labourers than for the objects of Irish Separatists is to form themselves into a new body."

Such a new body was formed, and soon, namely, on May 12th, 1888, at Birmingham, when the Rural Labourers' League was inaugurated. Mr. Joseph Chamberlain, M.P., occupied the chair, and there was a crowded attendance, including a large number of local and other representative persons. Letters of apology for absence were also received from a very large number of M.P.'s and others. Mr. Chamberlain dwelt (1) upon the discreditable action of Mr. Gladstone and his followers, who, after voting for Mr. Collings' Amendment, the carrying of which resulted in the overthrow of the Salisbury administration, failed to do anything whatever to carry out the policy which was the means of his and their returning to power ; and (2) upon the work in which for many years Mr. Collings had been engaged on behalf of the agricultural labourers. He concluded by moving the following resolution :

" That it is desirable that an Association should be formed for the purpose of securing the rural



labouring population the benefits of the Allotments Acts of 1882 and 1887 and of other legislative measures affecting them; of improving by all legitimate means the social and material conditions of the labourers; and generally of promoting every effort to make the village life of the country more prosperous and attractive."

The resolution was seconded by Mr. Eli Morris, a Cannock Chase working man, and was carried unanimously. Mr. Collings was voted to the position of President, and he remained President until the dissolution of the League in December, 1919.

In later pages will be found references to the League during its long career of usefulness under the constant and active guidance of Mr. Collings; but it may be said at once that it would be difficult to point to any organisation which, with the very moderate means at its disposal, has, in season and out of season, sought and accomplished such a large amount of useful work. Although hampered from time to time from lack of adequate financial support, and from other causes, it was never at a standstill; in fact, looking back on the more than thirty years of its existence, and judging it on the reports which it annually issued, one feels amazed at the enormous amount of work it has accomplished, first of all in securing public and then legislative attention to the question of rural reform, and next in the equally difficult task of securing the practical application of the legislative measures relating to

rural reform after they were placed upon the Statute Book. Many thousands of agricultural labourers and other working men have secured allotments and small holdings in consequence of legislation of which Mr. Collings and his Rural Labourers' League were the pioneers. The little difficulties, too, constantly arising and infinite in their variety affecting working men—not merely in connection with the land, but in connection with all sorts of subjects connected with their daily life—always were inquired into sympathetically by the Committee of the League, and settled almost invariably without leaving any sense of friction behind between class and class ; indeed to the adoption of this policy of avoiding all possible friction between the various rural interests very much of the League's success has been due.

The League, fortunately, had a "land" policy of its own. The policy was not one of a political party. The League, in fact, supported any politician who held the views it held. Its policy—which was always chiefly that of occupying ownership—was constantly advocated, not merely by correspondence, etc., from the Central Offices of the League, but by means of its widely circulating official organ, *The Rural World*, by travelling working-men agents of the rural type (numbering up to twenty-five, who were constantly touring the villages among the agricultural labourers), and, as the movement extended, by something like three thousand local village voluntary workers (also of the labourer and

small holder type) who regularly distributed the League's literature, organised local meetings, and generally promoted the policy of the League, whether they were at the time in the fields, in the cow-sheds, on the roads, in the village inns, or anywhere else where their fellows were to be found. A policy and an organisation thus advocated and worked—and with such an active chief as by the common consent of his colleagues on the Committee Mr. Collings proved to be—could not fail to achieve results and to exercise a very legitimate influence upon the minds of the people and of their representatives in Parliament.

## CHAPTER XXIV

### AGRICULTURAL EDUCATION AND SMALL HOLDINGS BILLS

1888-89. When Parliament opened with the Session of 1888, Mr. Collings immediately introduced his Agricultural Education Bill. This Bill he brought before Parliament almost annually until he was no longer able, through a serious accident, to attend the House of Commons. He never succeeded in securing sufficient support to get it placed on the Statute Book. At the same time, if the Education Act passed in 1917 is given full effect to, some at least of the objects he had in view in promoting his own Bill will be achieved. That Act is the greatest advance in the way of educating both urban and rural people which has been made since the Act of 1870.

Mr. Collings' Bill, however, continued to be discussed at many meetings of teachers, etc., throughout the country, and also in the newspapers, for many years, and as a result of these discussions and of the newspaper publicity, a very large number of school gardens were started in connection with village elementary schools. Some of these school gardens Mr. Collings himself

inspected, and the teachers invariably told him they were a pronounced success; whilst the children took, and take, enormous interest in the little plots, as indeed one might naturally suppose would be the case. It is, in Mr. Collings' view, at least as important to teach children by letting them actually do things as it is either to tell them how things should be done, or for them to store in their memories mere facts and principles without adequately illustrating their application.

In May, 1888 (as also in 1889, 1890, and 1891), Mr. Collings moved the Second Reading of his "Bill to facilitate the creation of Small Holdings in Land," a Conservative and Unionist Minister being in power. It was the same Bill practically as the one he moved in the Session of 1886 minus the "Allotments" part, which the Conservative Government took in hand in 1887 and which formed the basis of their measure. The object of the Small Holdings Bill still was to create a class of freeholders, partly with the aid of money advanced by and repayable to the Treasury. Little was now said in Parliament against the principle of compulsory purchase or the principle of the utilisation of land for special purposes; indeed, the object of the Bill met with, on the whole, very general approbation. Some details of it were, perhaps not unnaturally, objected to, but the policy of the re-settlement of our homeland was advanced. Mr. Walter Long, the Secretary of the Local Government Board, promised, however, that the Govern-

ment would consider whether, in connection with the Local Government Bill which was about to be introduced by the Government, power could be given to the new county authorities to assist in the creation of a race of peasant proprietors. This, in itself, was a substantial and official concession, greater than most people then anticipated, and certainly greater than could have been expected twelve months previously. The Bill was eventually talked out, but there was a general feeling left that the discussion of the measure had assisted the cause which Mr. Collings had at heart, and there was not now that raillery and impatience to listen to matters affecting the agricultural labourers and peasant proprietors which had hitherto existed.

A few weeks after the bringing in of the Small Holdings Bill above referred to, the Government decided to grant Mr. Collings a Select Committee to inquire into the whole subject of small holdings. This was an important step, and one Mr. Collings welcomed, although unfortunately the actual appointment of the Committee was much obstructed and delayed time after time by that section of the Liberal party who followed Mr. Gladstone upon Irish Home Rule, until it was in fact too late for the Committee to do much work during the then current Session. However, the outcome of this Committee, over which Mr. Chamberlain presided, of which Mr. Collings was a member, and before which he also gave valuable evidence, was the first Small Holdings Act

which was ever placed upon the Statute Book, and which was passed in 1892. The case for small holdings was proved up to the hilt before the Committee, and in spite of much derogatory comment, and in many cases of absurd questionings on the part of opponents who were members of the Committee, the argument for a wider extension of the small holdings system in this country was, from that time forth, proved beyond doubt. Thus another onward step was taken.

As showing the importance of the recently passed Allotments Act of 1887, which, although it possessed compulsory powers, was, as its supporters (Mr. Collings included) always stated would be the case, mainly of value because of the important "voluntary" clauses in it, it may be mentioned that the cases actually within the knowledge of the Rural Labourers' League up to the end of 1888 showed that over 2000 acres had been set out under allotments to over 2500 men. Those were cases with which the League itself had dealt. Local authorities had also supplied upwards of 1800 men with allotments in the same period; and, from statistics which became subsequently available, it was found that the clauses in question of the Act had been also—unknown to the League at the time—very extensively used by owners of land, who had set apart allotments in very many thousands of cases. The measure therefore had proved its value, and must be regarded as the most important stepping-stone

in the history of the allotments movement in this country.

Following upon the comparatively recent events above described, Mr. Collings was invited to be the chief guest at a dinner given in June, 1888, by the Liberal Unionist Club in London, and at which the Marquis of Hartington, M.P., took the chair. Lord Hartington, who was no more enthusiastic in favour of creating a peasant proprietary than he was enthusiastic over anything, had, nevertheless, as he showed at the meeting, sympathy with the demand for the creation of a much larger number of small holdings; whilst as a vice-president of the Rural Labourers' League and one of its founders, and a consistent supporter of it during the remainder of his life, Mr. Collings was glad that the Marquis should, as chairman, thus identify himself prominently with what may be called the land reform movement. Mr. Chamberlain was present, and also Baron de Mandat-Grancey, the latter of whom, coming from France, was well aware of the value, economic and otherwise, of the small-holder class to the stability and economic success of his country. At this gathering Mr. Collings took the opportunity, in view of the recent joining of forces of the Liberal Unionist party with the Conservatives, to point out to an important and purely party political gathering "that in the new political relationship which had come about all men of influence and position and riches should show that they were mindful of the



change," and that "there is no question of injustice, no question of wrong or confiscation, but simply a question of policy, which all present should consider"; and he ventured to add "that the increasing of the number of small cultivators was a conservative policy in the highest degree and sought to broaden and would broaden the foundations of the Society in which we live."

## CHAPTER XXV

### THE FIRST SMALL HOLDINGS ACT

1890-92. In 1890 the Allotments Appeals Act was passed. This measure provided for an appeal from the action or chiefly inaction of the authorities (usually the local rural sanitary authorities) under the Allotments Act of 1887 to the County Council. The Act was valuable as showing the authorities in question that there was a power of appeal against their decisions: although it has very seldom been requisite to use the Act. Unfortunately the small agricultural boroughs, which contained and contain large numbers of a class of men which the Act sought to benefit, were excluded from the operations of this Allotments Appeals Act. The Government yielded with reluctance to this weakening of the measure, and in later legislation the defect was fortunately removed.

During the same year exhaustive inquiries were made by the Select Committee on Small Holdings previously referred to; and in the Report which was subsequently issued, the Committee, in recommending that the principle of Mr. Collings' Bill should be adopted, stated that it was desirable

in the interests of the rural population that a national system of small holdings should be created. The Report added that the intervention of the Legislature was called for by the special circumstances of the case, and was justified by considerations affecting the well-being of the whole community; and, further, "it will undoubtedly tend to raise the character of the labouring class, and to stay that migration from the country to the towns which has already caused such deterioration of the rural population." The Committee also reported that by the adoption of the main principles of Mr. Collings' Bill recently and then before Parliament a solution might be found of the problem submitted to them, and they accordingly recommended that powers should be conferred on local authorities to acquire land for the purpose of small holdings, and also that in order to meet the case of ordinary labourers and to provide a ladder by which they may gradually raise themselves to the position of small owners, the local authorities, in conjunction with facilities for purchase, should have power to let land in small holdings. Finally, the Committee recommended that a sum of public money should be advanced to local authorities for the above purpose, such sum, in the first instance, not to exceed £5,000,000.

This Report brought the question of small holdings at once within the range of practical politics; and the Government, through the pressure of the Rural

Labourers' League and its sympathisers in and out of Parliament intimated their intention of dealing with the subject if possible during the then present session.

A Parliamentary Return was issued by the Government in 1890 showing that from 1886 (the year before the passing of the Allotments Act, 1887) to the date of the Return in question in 1890 there had been an increase in the number of allotments in England and Wales of no less than 94,765. The Report, moreover, attached to the Return stated that the annual increase in the years 1886 to 1890 was "three times as rapid as between 1873 and 1886"; and the Rural Labourers' League later in 1890 stated that it "had no hesitation in declaring" its belief that "since 1886 at least 150,000 persons have obtained allotments as a result of the direct and indirect operation of the Allotments Acts, 1887 and 1890." This was no small result, and one of which all who in any way advocated legislative action to secure it, might well feel gratified. It was proving, and up to the hilt, by statistics the case of the land reformers, and especially the case for reform so long urged by Mr. Collings, their chief.

In March, 1891, Mr. Collings again introduced his Small Holdings Bill, the Government now supported it, and the Second Reading was passed without a division. Another advance was thus made in connection with the small holdings question. The Government promised to deal with the subject as

soon as possible; which was in the next Session of Parliament, when, in Her Majesty's Speech at the opening thereof it was announced that "a measure for increasing the number of small holdings of land in agricultural districts in Great Britain" would be submitted by the Government.

Accordingly, on the 22nd of February, 1892, Mr. Chaplin, President of the Board of Agriculture, brought in a Bill, on behalf of the Government, dealing with small holdings. After much discussion it passed both Houses of Parliament, received the Royal Assent on the 22nd of June, 1892, and came into operation on the first day of October in that year. Mr. Collings, who had been very poorly in the early winter, went for several weeks to Biarritz, getting back in time to welcome the introduction into Parliament of the Bill in question and feeling much benefited by the experience of a warmer clime.

The Bill—into the full discussion of which it is perhaps not necessary to go—marked a distinct and important stage in the history of the Land Reform movement, being the first small holdings measure to be placed upon the Statute Book. It was eleven years, since he first gave notice of his motion dealing with the subject.

In thanking the Government for the measure, Mr. Collings added that it was "a step in the right direction." A great many amendments had been brought forward by those who were still opposed to small holdings or by those who were merely or mainly

opposed to the Government who brought in the Bill, and it looked at one time as though it would be smothered by one or other of these "supporters." Sir William Harcourt, however, said that it was impossible any Bill could be more important in its character or be more beneficial in its effects if it succeeded, as they all hoped it would. Mr. Haldane (now Lord Haldane) said the Bill was a great step forward; and Mr. Heneage congratulated the Government upon the Bill.

Immediately the Bill was passed Mr. Collings set about making it generally known in the rural districts. Accordingly, the travelling agents of his League, as well as the League's residential agents in the villages, were employed to address meetings and to circulate literature with regard to the Act; and it was not long before applications began to come into the offices of the League, asking that organisation to help the applicants to procure small holdings for them. The assistance was readily given, and, as always, it was given without any reference to the class, creed, or politics of the applicants. The reader who is interested in the practical application of this Act will find much valuable information thereon in Mr. Collings' admirable work, *Land Reform*. Like most initial legislation upon any given subject, the Act which was useful up to a point was, in a few years, found to be defective. So far as it was put into operation it was a pronounced success. Its operation, however, became limited for reasons which will

appear in due course, and Mr. Collings therefore continued his activities for a further measure of small holdings reform.

In this year Mr. Collings was made a Privy Councillor, much to the gratification of his friends in all parts of the country, as the subsequent correspondence received showed.

## CHAPTER XXVI

### PARISH COUNCILS: CHARITY COMMISSIONERS AND RURAL CHARITIES

1894. In 1894 the Local Government Act of that year was passed, popularly known as the Act for the establishment of Parish and District Councils.

It is sometimes forgotten that in the early stages of the history of this country the parish was the unit of government, and that until, in later centuries, the interest of the labourer in the affairs of his parish was practically extinguished (through no fault and with no proper sanction of his), he had a real interest and voice in the local government of his neighbourhood. The Act in question formed the completion of the legislation begun in 1888, when an Act creating County Councils was passed. The Bill of 1888 contained provisions for the establishment of County Councils and of District Councils, but through pressure of time the latter portion—dealing with District Councils—had to be abandoned. It was also the intention of the then Government to bring in a measure for parochial reform, but it was found impossible to pass more than the Act creating County Councils.



Under the Local Government Act of 1894 the procedure provided for the acquiring of allotments was somewhat altered and improved. Parish Councils were enabled to exercise the power to approach the District Councils for allotments, which power had already been given to any six ratepayers in a parish under the Allotments Act of 1887. The Parish Council could also appeal to the County Council in case the District Council failed to act. The County Council was authorised to make an order to obtain the land by compulsory means, and if the County Council refused to do so the District Council could approach the Local Government Board, who could make such order. The Parish Councils were not enabled to purchase land for allotments, but they could hire it. If they could not hire it voluntarily, they could hire it compulsorily, after obtaining such an order as that alluded to.

Whilst the Act of 1894, which Mr. Collings naturally welcomed, gave these further facilities for increasing the supply of allotments throughout the country, it contained certain clauses in regard to rural charities which seemed to him to be very objectionable. For example, under one of the subsections the powers of the Charity Commissioners were enormously increased. As the law stood, the Commissioners could deal as they liked with any charity the annual income of which was under £50. They could force a new scheme for its administration on a locality regardless of the wishes of the inhabi-

tants thereof or of the Trustees of the charity. No charity, however, the annual income of which was *above* £50, could be dealt with by the Commissioners except on the application of a majority of the Trustees. Such application, fortunately, was rarely made willingly, for the reason that afterwards the Trustees lost all power over the charity, and the Commissioners were able to deal with it as they (the Commissioners) thought proper.

The sub-section above referred to sought to give to the Charity Commissioners the same power *over all charities with annual incomes up to* £500, as they (the Commissioners) already possessed over charities with incomes below £50. The change contemplated by the sub-section was, therefore, one of great magnitude, and one likely to result in much injustice to the poorer classes. It was manifest that a question of this importance ought not to be settled by a side-wind in the form of a sub-section of a Bill which was being somewhat hurried through Parliament in an autumn Session. Accordingly Mr. Collings, who was always extremely alert where the charities of the poor were to be dealt with, gave notice of opposition to the sub-section, and took other steps to achieve the end he had in view by addressing circulars to Members of the House detailing and explaining the facts. The result of his efforts was that the Government before the Bill was passed withdrew the sub-section without a word of comment.

In this year Mr. Collings received numerous in-

quiries respecting rural charities, as he had done indeed for many years previously. The Charity Commissioners, in connection with the "George Jarvis" Charity, left for the benefit of the poor inhabitants of certain parishes in Herefordshire, propounded a scheme for the future regulation of the Charity, the result of which if passed into law would have been to divert many thousands of pounds from the poor for the purpose of promoting higher education. The proposals of the Commissioners were resisted by all classes of people in the three villages affected, and, at the urgent request of the local people, Mr. Collings undertook to oppose the Commissioners' scheme in the House of Commons. Once more, therefore, he made appeals to Members of the House stating the nature of the scheme, and asking them to be so good as to render him, by their votes and otherwise, all the assistance they could. The rejection of the scheme was, at Mr. Collings' request, moved by Mr. (later Sir James) Rankin (a Vice-President of the Rural Labourers' League), in whose Division the parishes affected were situate. Mr. Collings and others supported Mr. Rankin by speeches, and after an animated discussion the Government were compelled to withdraw the scheme.

During this year also the trustees of several other charities were compelled, at Mr. Collings' instigation, to put into operation the Allotments Extension Act of 1882, and thus to supply allotments to the poor parishioners entitled to them.

One of the greatest obstacles encountered in enabling the labourers to take advantage of the Act just referred to was the indifference and at times the positive opposition of the Charity Commissioners to the aspirations of the labourers.

The reason the Act was passed was because the Act of 1832, as already suggested, had become inoperative, as was also, it may be added, another Act passed in 1873 enabling vestries and bodies of trustees of charity land to entrust their duties to committees.

It was Mr. Collings' intention that the labourers should be able to apply to the County Court judge for an order against trustees who would not work the Act of 1882, but during the passage of the Bill through Parliament the powers he wished to give to the County Court judges were transferred to the Charity Commissioners. Not only had this body little or no sympathy whatever with the object of the Act, but in many cases where proposals were made to utilise the charity land for allotments purposes the Commissioners actually wrecked the proposals. A good deal of feeling was caused by their attitude, and at Mr. Collings' instigation resolutions were passed at meetings of the Allotments Extension Association, and at other meetings, urging the Commissioners to protect the rights of the labourers by responding to the legitimate appeals made to them, and by not allowing any difficulty to be placed in the way of the Act being carried out. These resolutions, how-

ever, were ignored by the Commissioners, and Mr. Collings therefore with just indignation determined to raise the matter in Parliament. This he did. He said :

“ I am going to appeal from the Charity Commissioners to Her Majesty’s Government, and to ask whether they will permit an Act of Parliament that has been passed for the benefit of poor men to be ignored and rendered a dead letter. It will be in the recollection of the House that in 1882 an Act was passed under the provisions of which all trustees of charity lands in the country, provided the latter are not required for educational purposes, are required to offer such lands to the labourers and others in the parishes in which they are situated. The object of the Act was to ensure the land being let in plots of not less than one acre to poor labourers at a fair agricultural rent. In the large majority of cases, however, the Charity Commissioners have failed to require the trustees of such lands to let them in accordance with the provisions of the Act, and they have even refused to enter into communication with a large and influential Association which had been started for the purpose of carrying into effect the object of the Act. The question is : will the Government allow the Charity Commissioners to override an Act of Parliament ? I can quote fifty or sixty cases in which the Commissioners have overridden the Act.”

Mr. Mundella, on behalf of the Government, defended the Commissioners and expressed the opinion that the matter should be brought before the Select Committee which had been appointed to inquire into the working of the Charitable Trusts Acts and the Allotments Extension Act.

Mr. Collings, who knew he had excellent material, adopted Mr. Mundella's suggestion, and when the final report of the Select Committee was published it stated that "Your Committee thinks that the Commissioners might well have been less exacting regarding technical points of procedure in dealing with the Allotments Extension Association, and must express the hope that these difficulties between the Association and the Charity Commissioners may be overcome." It will be gathered, therefore, that Mr. Collings' charges against the Charity Commissioners in the House of Commons itself were substantiated before and confirmed by the Select Committee, and that the Commissioners received a much-needed rebuke.

The labourers felt extremely bitter about the matter, and particularly at the arrogant attitude of the Commissioners towards what they regarded as their own Association, namely the Allotments Extension Association. The *Labourers' Chronicle* remarked that the Commissioners had "refused to correspond with Mr. Collings and his Allotments Extension Association on behalf of the labourers on the ground that they could not correspond with two

people at once ; and when, on one occasion, the labourers did write them they told them they could only receive communications on foolscap paper."

Mr. J. Chamberlain gave Mr. Collings valuable support in protesting against the attitude of the Commissioners, for which he was taken to task by the *Spectator*, particularly in reference to a scheme for the diversion of a valuable endowment left by Alderman Dauntsey for the benefit of the poor in the parish of West Lavington, Wilts. Replying to these criticisms, Mr. Chamberlain stated spiritedly : " The gist of our contention is that the Charity Commissioners have, in an immense number of instances, diverted funds intended for the benefit of the poor to the advantage of the well-to-do. The Charity Commissioners appear to think that their main function is the provision of secondary education, and for this purpose all is fish that comes to their net. Now a secondary school is a school for the upper and middle classes, and free admissions are of no value to secure its advantages to the poor, and even scholarships will not even produce this result, since the labourers on 12s. or 15s. a week cannot afford to dispense with the earnings of their children. I may be permitted to add that secondary education has no warmer advocate than myself ; but I think that the class to which I belong is rich enough and liberal enough to provide for its wants from its own resources without taking from the poor any portion of the scanty funds that are

properly applicable to the improvement of their condition."

The Commissioners, safely entrenched behind the prejudices of the time, were, in the main, invulnerable from attack. The only way of checking their schemes was to deal with them in Parliament. Such was Mr. Collings' practice, and one which there is reason enough to think they first disliked and then feared. When they tabled a scheme for diverting the funds of the Dauntsey Charity to purposes other than those for which those funds were intended, Mr. Collings approached Mr. W. H. Smith, the First Lord of the Treasury, with the view of defeating the scheme, which he regarded as a shameful one. He found in Mr. W. H. Smith a cordial sympathiser, and although that gentleman was overwhelmed with work of other kinds, he helped to such an extent that Mr. Collings was able in the House to bring about the defeat of the scheme and to save that small rural district from the robbery of the very large funds intended for its poor.

Later on Mr. Chamberlain and Mr. Collings attended at West Lavington at the opening ceremony of the Dauntsey Agricultural School, which school was entirely due to defeating the Commissioners as above explained. They were both called upon to speak, and there was an influential as well as a numerous gathering to hear them and to express their gratitude for the success which had been achieved.



The evil of the Commissioners was sometimes more in the administration than in the actual state of the law. For example, before free education was established, their policy of administration was always to take away the boon of free education where it was enjoyed and to impose fees. The poor, therefore, might thank the wisdom and energy of a man like Mr. Collings, who set limits to the interference of the Commissioners, as, but for those limits, few of the charities directly affecting the poor would now remain.

The Cardiff College Scheme—which is another example of a scheme propounded by the Commissioners—took away £1300 left directly for the poor of that place. At a meeting held there in respect to the opening of a large hall, with a reference library of 10,000 volumes and a lending library of 50,000 volumes, one of the speakers, with unconscious irony, said: “It is a very difficult task to convert old women’s flannel petticoats into a spacious library.” Mr. Collings, who interested himself in this matter, said that not only ought it *not* to be easy, but that it ought to be impossible. It was, in his view, all very well for those who have never been cold to talk about turning coals and blankets into “spacious halls.”

At the same period the Charity Commissioners set out to do a grave injustice to the poor of the parish of Donnington, in Lincolnshire, where the funds of Cowley’s Charity were, by the will of the

founder, left for the benefit of the poor for ever. The Commissioners drew up a new scheme under which they proposed to devote the larger part of the income to "a commercial and agricultural school" mainly for the benefit of a class other than that to which the Charity belonged. Mr. Collings therefore asked Mr. H. Pollock, the Member for the Division, to move a resolution in the House of Commons for the rejection of the scheme so far as it referred to the particular diversion of the Charity alluded to. As President of the Rural Labourers' League, Mr. Collings spoke strongly in support of this resolution, which was carried, and thus the Commissioners once again received a salutary check. Similar success also attended Mr. Collings' efforts in connection with numbers of other charities to which it is unnecessary perhaps to allude.

It may be asked what would be said if interference were sought with what belonged to any other class than the poor? If the higher classes had endowments which the mass of the people thought were not being put to the best uses, would it be right that those endowments should be taken away? It was often urged that poor people crowded into the parishes in which doles existed. Mr. Collings' answer was that rich people do very much the same thing. If, he said, one goes to Birmingham, Bedford, etc., he will find the well-to-do classes crowding into those places in order to get an education worth perhaps £50 a year for £6. Mr. Collings suggested

that the initiation of all schemes for the administration of the charities of a county should be in the hands of the County Council, a body, he urged, far more capable of dealing with such local affairs than the Imperial Parliament. He said the councils would, of course, have to consult the parishes affected, and that there should be statutory safeguards to prevent them diverting the charities from the original intentions of the founders of them.

## CHAPTER XXVII

### OCCUPYING OWNERSHIP: A VISIT ABROAD: FISCAL POLICY

1895-1903. Mr. Collings introduced, in April, 1895, for the first time, his Purchase of Land (England and Wales) Bill, and he introduced it almost continually up to 1914. The Bill was divided into two parts.

Part I was to enable the ordinary farming tenants to acquire the freehold of their farms, the purchase money being advanced to them by the State and being repaid by them by means of annual instalments over a period of years, and with the option on the part of the purchasers to redeem any outstanding instalments at any time.

Part II provided that the Board of Agriculture might purchase suitable land for persons wishful to buy it and able and willing to cultivate the same. This part was to apply to the agricultural labourers and would-be small holders. The Board were given power to put up suitable buildings on such land, including a dwelling-house, and were to be given power to advance the whole of the purchase money in suitable cases. The repayment of the purchase money was to be made in the same way as under Part I.

The Bill itself was never passed into law.<sup>1</sup> As will be seen, however, later on, the principle of the Bill so far as it relates to agricultural labourers and other would-be small holders, has been given full effect to under the Land Settlement (Facilities) Act, 1919; whilst, if farmers were not the rather unimaginative, slow-thinking, and slow-acting class they are (even in their own interests), they might well have secured by the same period an instalment at least of similar legislative opportunities and benefits.

In October, 1896, Mr. Collings paid a visit to two agricultural schools near Rennes, Ille-et-Villaine, where he was much struck with the practical character and the reasonable cost of the education given to those desiring it. He gave public expression to his opinions at the time, the object of which expression was to contrast the system of agricultural education in France, where it was cheap, practical, and widespread, with that in England, which was dear, theoretical, and, as he said at the time, "somewhat top-heavy." Mr. W. H. Hall (a well-known landowner of Six Mile Bottom, Cambridgeshire) and others immediately engaged Mr. Collings in a correspondence, which was not confined to education, but which drifted into the general question of small culture. Mr. Collings' reply to Mr. Hall, his chief antagonist, is well worth reproducing. It is as

<sup>1</sup> Mr. Collings has dealt fully with the arguments for and against the Bill in his works *Land Reform* and *The Colonisation of Rural Britain*, so that it is unnecessary to repeat them here.

follows and is a good example of his argumentative style, showing as it does knowledge, a redoubtable spirit, and at the same time moderation :

“ My friend, Mr. Hall, severely criticises my statement that ‘ great advantages would accrue from an extension of small cultivation in England.’ He bases his opposition to ‘ *la petite culture* ’ in this country on several grounds, none of which, I think, will bear examination. He states that he has found it to be an economic (not a social) failure in a certain ‘ corn-growing ’ region in East Anglia. Against this, if necessary, there could be brought a number of cases in which small holders have succeeded. I, however, attach no importance to this argument, as no one pretends that small cultivation is suitable to every locality and in all circumstances. Further, no doubt Mr. Hall would have to admit that larger farming in the ‘ corn-growing ’ region to which he referred had been equally unsuccessful.

“ The next argument is that ‘ *la petite culture* ’ succeeds in France because there is a ‘ highly protective tariff ’ in that country. Surely Mr. Hall knows that protection does not materially affect the peasant cultivator, who, as a rule, only grows corn for his own consumption, and finds the same nutriment for himself and family in a bushel of corn whether the price be three shillings or six.

“ The next reason given by Mr. Hall for the success of small cultivation in France is the oft-repeated one

of 'superior climate.' The climate, however, is about the same now as it was when Arthur Young described districts in France hundreds of miles in extent as 'wastes, deserts, covered with ling, furze, and broom,' and abounding in misery and poverty—districts which, at the present time, are beautifully cultivated by a numerous class of working farmers, whose stability and modest wealth make them the greatest factor in the strength and prosperity of the nation. Is it the climate of England that prevents our producing butter, fancy cheese, and other of the smaller articles of food, for which we pay so many millions sterling to the Norman and Breton cultivator?

“The next argument Mr. Hall advances is that there is a 'skilled population in France.' That is so; but whose fault is it that we have not the same at home? Our agricultural labouring classes, so far as natural ability goes, are the finest in the world; but we do little or nothing to develop their capacity or aid their natural aptitude. We are spending huge sums in high agricultural education of a theoretical character, but we do not recognise that it is, after all, in the mass of our rural population that the reserve of cultivators exists from which we must draw, educate, and train the class of working farmers under consideration. In France they have long recognised this. In the numerous agricultural schools there, learning by doing is the principle adopted, and no pupil, young or old, rich or poor, can pass his

examination unless he can practise on the farm that which he has learned in the classroom. This is a main cause of the development in agriculture which has taken place in France during the past thirty years.

“ I am amused at Mr. Hall’s crowning argument, namely that in this matter he speaks from experience, and that I speak from none. My experience has been of a less pleasant, though, perhaps, of a more practical, character than that of a public-spirited landlord, who, from the kindest and best motives, lets land for others to cultivate as small holdings. I have never held that a system of peasant proprietary in England can be forced into a healthy existence by benevolent patronage. What I contend for is, that public and general facilities should be given for its gradual and natural growth. This can easily be done ; and if it be true, as I firmly believe it is, that the stability of a nation is closely bound up with the existence of a numerous and contented peasantry, the sooner it is done the better.”

In 1898, in an address to his constituents, he remarked on the subject of Socialism that the antidote for it was in the direction of giving facilities for individuals to improve their position. Many of the working classes were in his view allying themselves to the socialist movement “ simply because they did not understand what it meant ” : in other words, every working man with a grumble was liable to be drawn into its nets. “ The more,”



he urged, "they are given in the way of facilities for improving their position in life, the more they will appreciate the need for all classes living in happiness with one another, and the absolute futility of living at loggerheads."

In 1899 a rather amusing incident occurred whilst Mr. Collings was addressing a public meeting. During the whole of his speech he had been subjected to frequent interruptions from a member of the audience who was obviously drunk. He bore the infliction patiently, but before winding up his address he mentioned that an Inebriates Bill had been introduced into the House of Commons, the object of which was "to do away for the future with the long lists of convictions for drunkenness so frequently met with in the police courts." "The justices," he said, "would have power under it to send an habitual drunkard to a reformatory for five years." As soon as he heard this, the drunken member of the audience was seized with alarm, and, staggering to his feet, he hurried down the room, with the remark, "Goo' ni', sir; I think I berrer go," much to the amusement of all present.

In the same year and later, a considerable controversy arose relative to the "flash" point of petroleum. A Petroleum Bill introduced by Mr. Reckitt came before the House of Commons and Mr. Collings opposed it. The latter pointed out that the Bill only dealt with one of the numerous recommendations of the Petroleum Committee, and that the

Government had a Bill in an advanced stage which it intended to bring forward in due course. He also showed that the deaths from the "low flash" oil which had been constantly brought before the public for the last year or two were, so far as they could be traced, not due to such oil at all, but to lamp accidents. The "high flash" people had said that England was the dumping ground for the American "low flash" oil unused by themselves. As a fact, it was, he pointed out, only in six American States where the flash point was as high as 100 degrees; whilst in most European countries the standard was the same as our own. In China and Japan it was lower, and in India the authorities there had not thought it necessary to raise it beyond the then existing standard. Most people would have been satisfied with this explanation, but the "high flash" advocates insisted on sending their Bill to a Division, in which they were handsomely defeated, and the Bill, therefore, was rejected.

A banquet was given in 1900 by the Birmingham Chamber of Commerce to a Chinese Minister who was touring the country, and, as President of the Chamber, Mr. Collings presided. In his speech Mr. Collings made the policy of "three acres and a cow" the basis of his remarks. He contended that it was the practical application of such policy in China which enabled the Celestial Empire to maintain its vast population, and that we should have to adopt it before we could thoroughly restore agriculture.

“ If,” he said, “ we lost our Russian trade, which represents some fourteen millions, Chambers of Commerce would move heaven and earth to secure its recovery ; but no such attempt is made in regard to the sixteen millions which are annually spent on imported butter alone.” He asked why some effort should not be put forward to alter this and to divert into the pockets of our farmers and the owners of the three acres and a cow the vast sum which was yearly sent abroad for food. “ About ten or twelve miles from Birmingham,” he went on to say, “ you will see what the Worcestershire County Council have done to put this policy in force. A few years ago the village of Catshill was a god-forsaken, poverty-stricken place. If you go there to-day you will find it full of those small working cultivators, and you will find comfort reigning throughout the place. I counted twenty-one horses and carts the other day, and a corresponding number of implements, whereas a few years ago nothing of the kind existed there. From that one district of Catshill much has been spent in Birmingham in the purchase of spades and shovels and many other articles—all out of Mother Earth.” The Worcestershire County Council, which in every way promoted the Catshill settlement, have acted as pioneers in the closer settlement movement in our country. They have continued the policy, and their example is a shining one to the County Councils in other parts of the kingdom.

At a dinner—in the same year—in aid of the funds for the Jewish Industrial School for boys at Hayes, in Middlesex, which had recently been opened, Mr. Collings expressed some opinions on the question of Jews and crime, which are well worth recording.

“ I quite agree,” he said, “ with Lord Rothschild that there has not been an undue increase of crime amongst the Jews, and the reason I assign for it is that parental authority and family life are more pronounced amongst the Jews than among any other race. Last year I spent a whole night in the East End of London, and a very affecting incident occurred at one of the places I visited. I went into a Jewish home. It was a very poor home ; but, nevertheless, there was that indescribable feeling of home about it. I found there an old man and two or three sons hard at work at one o’clock in the morning, and I asked one of the sons why he did not seek something better. He answered, ‘ We should do were it not for dad ; we can’t forsake him.’ This is only one incident that has strengthened my conviction that the family feeling which exists among the Jews will protect—as far as protection is possible—Jewish children from lapsing into crime. Of course, you have your exceptional cases, which have to be provided for ; and your offending juveniles need an Industrial School. I read the admirable paper which was prepared by Mr. Philip Ornstien. From that it appears that it is absolutely impossible if you wish to do justice to your

children in regard to matters of faith and religion to continue to send your children to the general Industrial Schools. A school of your own was, therefore, the only practical solution of the difficulty which presented itself; and my knowledge of such institutions convinces me that in years to come you will recognise that you have done wisely in providing an Industrial School for Jewish boys. Our forefathers settled the great question of crime in a satisfactory manner for themselves by a brutal criminal code, brutally administered. The 'settlement' in question was either transportation, imprisonment, or hanging. They hung men by the score in groups, and thought they were adopting the right means to stamp out crime. Edmund Burke, in the last century, said, 'It is difficult to get an Act through Parliament, but there is no difficulty in getting an Act through that provides another sentence of death for certain offenders.'

"There were 215 offences in those days for which sentence of death was the punishment. Children of ten years were sentenced to be hanged, and children of thirteen were actually hung for crimes the nature of which it is absurd to suppose they could even comprehend. Reforms, however, have been introduced since then. Men and women have recognised that children of tender years are not criminals by nature; and that it is necessary to deal with those who show criminal tendencies in

early years, in a manner which will affect their natures, which are still pliable and capable of reformation.

“Of all movements, religious or otherwise, the Industrial School movement stands pre-eminently successful. Eighty per cent of the children who have been discharged from Industrial Schools during the past three years are now doing well in permanent occupations, either as soldiers, sailors, mechanics or domestic servants. What is this hooliganism and street ruffianism of which we now hear so much? It is simply misdirected energy—untrained force, over which we have not as yet exercised any beneficial influence. A few years' training and discipline, of regular habits and work will transform this force into worthy and useful citizens. Society has the choice. Either it can recognise its duty and produce a good citizen, or shirk its responsibilities and produce a criminal. The advantage of an Industrial School is that it is not entirely an official institution but enlists the sympathy of all its supporters. That sympathy is something that moves the world, and if readily exercised will give power to the regeneration of our race.” Mr. Collings spoke with feeling and with knowledge. His Devonshire efforts—as these pages have shown—had long since convinced him of the value of the Industrial School managed by sympathetic, wise, and tactful people.

In August and September, 1902, Mr. Collings went to the Engadine, visiting Pontresina, Lucerne, etc.

At the hotel at which he stayed at the latter place Lord Salisbury was lying seriously ill.

In 1903<sup>1</sup> and onwards, Mr. Collings spoke a good deal on the question of the fiscal reform policy which Mr. Chamberlain had recently propounded ; showing how the nation and not least the agricultural community, in his opinion, would benefit by it.

The system of free imports, he urged, which had prevailed for the last fifty or more years had hit almost every industry in the country severely, but it had to a large extent helped to ruin the agricultural industry. He said that we could not injure agriculture without injuring every other industry, and that if we lessened the production from the soil, we lessened the purchasing power in every direction. The underlying principle of Mr. Chamberlain's proposal was employment. His object, in fact, was to increase production, and therefore employment, and to make both reasonably constant, good, and continuing. Mr. Collings thought the object a right one, and he spoke much in support of it. In his work *Land Reform* he gave many facts

<sup>1</sup> From 1895, and for a few years after that date (till 1902), Mr. Collings was Under-Secretary for the Home Department. He did a very great deal of work of much interest ; but it was mainly Departmental work of a kind in no way connected with rural reform. The Rural Labourers' League, however, was active in the villages in pushing forward his rural reform policy and generally educating the people to the need of much further legislative action than had yet been achieved. He was guiding it all the time and was a regular attendant at its monthly Committee meetings.

from his own knowledge and experience in opposition to many, as he asserted, false statements regarding the price of food in the first half of the nineteenth century. Some of these appear in the present pages.

In this year Mr. Collings went on a tour to India, and of this tour he declared :—“ I have never made a journey so full of interest and so fascinating as this one. The people are so different and picturesque, the colour, the dresses, and the variety of races, together with the richness of the country, are literally astonishing to anyone coming from colder climes. The productions of India are so varied ; and British capital joined with native labour are proceeding with rapid strides in the production of almost all kinds of manufacture. Many foolish people, and especially foolish people in the House of Commons, talk a great deal about ‘ India for the Indians,’ and a ‘ self-governed ’ India. These people are generally termed globe-trotters, who after a week in any country imagine they know a great deal more about that particular land than the people who have lived there for the greater part of their lives. People who are familiar with India have often remarked to me that the longer they stayed there the less they seemed to understand the people, and the less able to solve the problems connected with that vast possession.

“ About seventy different languages are spoken in India, and under British rule all these tribes



are commonly kept in peace and quietude. This is very different from the state of things which prevailed when the races fought with one another for supremacy. England governs the country with practically a handful of Englishmen. Through their skill, care, and honest administration, that vast territory is kept at peace. If we have to be proud of one thing, it is of the Civil Service in India. Men of twenty to thirty years of age are situated in a tract of land as big as half of England with hardly half a dozen Europeans near them, and yet they practically govern that district. The natives follow their rule, and although some of the natives may hate England as England, yet the whole of the community are imbued with one fixed idea, viz. the honesty of English rule. How a handful of Englishmen can rule over 300,000,000 or more of people in the manner they are doing is due to one cause, viz. that the honesty and good intentions of English rule are thoroughly believed in by the natives. That is the central principle."

## CHAPTER XXVIII

### “AN AGRICULTURAL PARTY”: SALVATION ARMY AND EMIGRATION

1904-5. Mr. Collings was asked by a correspondent to give his views on the projected establishment of an agricultural association, having for its ultimate object the formation of a separate agricultural party in the House of Commons, and this he did. It was a subject which appealed forcibly to him.

The notion of having a separate agricultural party he regarded as a good one, but everything, he urged, hung on what was meant by an “agricultural party.” Does it include the labourers, without whom, he thought, the objects in view would never really be obtained?

He thought it difficult to generalise on the subject, because there is every variety of class interest in the great industry of agriculture. For instance, we have in England the best farmers in the world, but it would be altogether a mistake to suppose that they represent all the farmers, or anything beyond a minority. Again, we have land cultivated in the highest state of efficiency; but if we take the bulk of farmers, or the bulk of the land, these remarks

do not apply. We have also farmers who recognise that labourers with small holdings of land, with spare time on their hands, are the most useful class to help the farmer ; and this is the view taken by farmers throughout the Continent. On the other hand, we have farmers who think the labourers must be a distinct class, with no other views than that of being and remaining weekly wage earners.

On the Continent, he said, where peasant proprietary exists, the farmer and labourer (who is also a landowner) row in the same boat, and pull in the same direction. This is not so in England ; and he stated that it is difficult for it to become so, so long as our present system of land tenure remains—that is, a system of landlord, farmer, and labourer. That system “ exists in no other country in Europe ; and not even everywhere in the United Kingdom, because Ireland has escaped from it.”

“ Further,” he declared, “ though it may be denied, it is nevertheless a fact, that under our system the interests of one class are opposed to that of the others.” The object of an association, he thought, should be to improve the condition of the cultivators of the soil, and to demand that Governments, which have hitherto so neglected agriculture, should give attention to it. It was difficult to see, however, how that could be brought about under our present land tenure.

Suppose, for instance (he urged), that by legislation the position of the tenant farmer was materially

and visibly improved, what would happen then is that which has happened invariably in the history of agriculture—the rents would be raised. He said that he must not be understood to be making any charge against landlords. “They, again, differ in their views. Some of them would, no doubt, not take advantage of the prosperity referred to, but the commercial section of them would undoubtedly do so. They would act like other people in their place—on the commercial principle of doing the best with their land. The farmer, in his turn, being a yearly tenant, and subject to a rise in rent, would be obliged, in his own interest, to keep down the labour bill, in order, after paying his rent, to reserve a profit for himself. The whole system is one which has broken down in every other country but ours, and is a dead failure here.”

His proposal, he stated, is that the tenant farmer, by the aid of the State, should be the possessor of his holding. That accomplished, the demand “could be fairly made on the State for any amount of aid to the cultivating owner, because such aid, no matter to what extent it might be given, would go direct from the State into the land, and increase its cultivation. The community at large, the taxpayers, would agree to this, while they would never agree to any substantial aid given to the tenant farmer which would more or less go into the pockets of the landlord.” He went on to say, “When my Purchase of Land Bill was discussed recently before the Central

Chamber of Agriculture the terms on which the discussion was to hang were actually put down in the agenda paper in an antagonistic form. But an amendment in a contrary sense was moved and carried."

He concluded by saying that our agricultural associations, whether Chambers of Agriculture or Agricultural Societies, "are, for the most part, top-heavy, governed by the ideas of the few, and in which the great mass of the ordinary farmers of the country are but little interested." He had, in fact, "no great hope of any substantial improvement through the agency of associations alluded to if they are based on the usual principles. . . ."

It was in February, 1904, at a Council meeting of the Central Chamber of Agriculture, when, as above stated, the Purchase of Land Bill was down for discussion. A motion was to be moved to reject the Bill, so he promptly decided to attend before this very representative and well-known agricultural body in support of his proposals. The motion was duly made and seconded, whereupon a Monmouthshire farmer moved an amendment approving of the Bill. Mr. Collings followed immediately in favour of this amendment, which was carried by practically a two to one majority. Those present at this particular meeting are not likely to forget the force and earnestness displayed by him on that occasion.

At later meetings of the Central Chamber of Agriculture, Mr. Collings' Bill was reapproved, thus

showing that agricultural opinion was being, if slowly, educated up to a recognition of its importance.

A measure of considerable importance to scale-makers and dealers slipped quietly through Parliament in 1904, and came into operation on January 1, 1905.

It was "An Act to amend the law relating to weights and measures," and its principal object was to bring about uniformity in the administration of the previous Acts throughout the country, and to do away with the friction and inconvenience caused by instruments stamped in one county not being recognised in another.

A conference of inspectors and manufacturers of weighing and measuring instruments was held in the Council Chamber, Birmingham, on April 26, 1895. Mr. Collings presided over the conference, and took a very active interest in the work of the joint Committee of inspectors and manufacturers that was appointed to formulate proposals for the amendment of the law in regard to weights and measures. They reported that "through the absence of uniform and compulsory regulations, applicable to the whole country, inspectors are compelled to use their own judgment on many important points, thus causing practice and decisions to vary in different localities. This, added to the fact that the Standards Department of the Board of Trade has no power or authority to enforce its decisions in any questions in dispute, is the cause of confusion in the

administration of the Acts, and consequently of much inconvenience to traders and manufacturers."

Mr. Collings, further, presided over sixteen meetings of the Committee, which ultimately drew up a series of proposed amendments to the then existing Acts (largely embodied in the new Act), and also suggestions for the new regulations to be issued in the near future by the Board of Trade.

In this year (1904) he introduced a Bill to amend the Small Holdings Act—to give further financial facilities to those desiring to own and occupy small holdings—and although it was never passed into law, yet it was brought before the House practically every year up to 1914, and its principle was completely adopted in the Land Settlement (Facilities) Act, 1919, to which reference will be made in due course.

The Salvation Army started a scheme for the emigration of our people. Mr. Collings, as will have been seen already, was a convinced opponent of these organised deportations. The Salvation Army was doing so much good work, in so many ways, that people were disposed to accept, without criticism, any scheme put forward by "General" Booth, as the high and noble motives on which his action was always based were unquestionable. Mr. Collings thought, however, that the public should carefully examine the emigration scheme propounded by the "General" before they gave it their support.

“General” Booth’s proposal was, in his opinion, a scheme for the “wholesale assisted emigration of the working classes of this country.” The “riff-raff,” the “undesirables,” and the physically or mentally weak would not be affected. These would remain at home, as only the strong, sound, healthy, and industrious were eligible. The families were to be “carefully selected”—all “able-bodied men with their wives and families who belonged chiefly to agriculture and allied industries.”

Mr. Collings regarded it as an appalling scheme, and one to which neither sanction nor support should be given by anyone “who had the welfare of our own old country at heart.”

To get rid of the “surplus” population was the reason given for this wholesale deportation. The reason was a specious one, for, as Mr. Collings had over and over again pointed out, rural England had become “a sparsely populated country, with large areas in it either a desert or fast becoming one.” There were millions of acres, he said, out of cultivation, given over to cattle and sport. This vast acreage of land was “crying out” for the very kind of labour which it was proposed to send abroad.

The Government of Australia were wisely agreeing to “General” Booth’s scheme on the condition that “the emigrants are to be approved by them before their departure.” Such a mass of able-bodied humanity would, of course, be useful for the cultivation of our own deserted fields; but for our



own Government to give aid to the scheme seemed to Mr. Collings to be an act of such a character as to be little short of criminal.

"The time may come," he urged, in the course of criticisms on the subject, "when we may see a Government, not ruled by commercialism, that will not neglect agriculture, as it is neglected now, but will see in that great industry the root of national prosperity and social strength, and will act accordingly."

There was something humiliating to him in the bare suggestion that, for the solution of any problem, the richest country in Europe should have no alternative to sending abroad the best and the choicest of its workers and wealth producers. "A shipload of gold," he said, "sent oversea is of secondary importance—it is only money; but a shipload of English muscle, sinew, and lustihood, the real wealth of the nation, leaving our shores never to return, is a sight at which to weep."

## CHAPTER XXIX

### "AN ISLAND CITADEL": ANOTHER SMALL HOLDINGS REPORT

1906. Mr. Haldane (now Lord Haldane) gave an address on the subject of the food supply in war time, and he was reported in the newspapers as saying: "Thanks to the gift of Providence, we have an island citadel; and, so long as we keep the command of the sea, so long will we be able to hold our own without the enormous armies needed by continental nations."

Mr. Collings was astonished at this apparent complacency on the part of one who had held high office under the Crown, and who was at the very time under notice in high official and ministerial position. He therefore gave publicity to a criticism he felt it a duty to make.

"That may be true so far as armies are concerned," Mr. Collings wrote in reply, "but Mr. Haldane left out one contingency which, in the case of a continental war in which we might become involved, would govern the whole situation." Inside this "island citadel" there are, he stated, 24 millions of people—men, women, and children—almost

wholly dependent for their daily bread on oversea supplies. At no time has the stock of wheat in the "island citadel" been more than enough for some weeks' consumption, and on one or two occasions it has fallen to only a fortnight's supply. All are agreed that our Navy should be strong enough to secure the command of the sea by seeking and destroying the enemy's fleets, but, in addition to this work, no navy could sufficiently protect our slow-going, grain-laden vessels from the attacks of swift, lightly armed ships, specially designed by an enemy to strike at the one vulnerable point in the defences of England. We have, he went on to say, no experience to guide us in a forecast of what would happen, because England in past continental wars was, like other countries now, practically a self-feeding nation. In any case, there would be a scarcity of grain, the speculator would be at work, and famine prices would prevail. We have a proletariat, a propertyless class, such as does not exist in any other country in Europe. On them, and their wives and families, the suffering would mainly fall. In this situation, in which England finds herself for the first time in her history, the "island citadel" would be reduced, not by attack, but by starvation.

Mr. Haldane stated that he was hopeful of learning something from experts. Three years ago, Mr. Collings urged, the subject was discussed by experts at the Royal United Service Institution, and the general opinion was that, in case of war, our

food supply<sup>o</sup> could not be protected. "We cannot," said one Admiral present, "protect our merchant ships; the thing is impossible," and he added: "It is no use your boasting that we have a powerful Navy, and, therefore, having command of the sea, that our food supply is safe. You cannot get a naval officer to say so." Many other arguments, said Mr. Collings, could be brought forward to show the dangerous position this country would be in in the event of a war with a continental power; and he concluded by remarking as follows: "It would be easy to show that this position is almost solely created by the decay of agriculture, than which there is no other secure basis for the defence of any nation. During the sixty years or so that 'commercialism' has governed the economy of England, agriculture has been reckoned of small account and treated almost like a boycotted industry."

It may fairly be claimed that subsequent events confirmed rather than otherwise the position Mr. Collings took up in the above matter. When a Minister of Agriculture states (as Lord Lee of Fareham very properly stated), at a public meeting of his countrymen, held in December, 1919, that the British Government in the later stages of the recent war were actually contemplating the possibility of our having to import even small quantities of food by submarine in order to feed the "island citadel," it would be a criminal policy on the part of any British Government if it any longer neglected to

grow all the food of which we are capable. It would be equally criminal on the part of the nation to support a policy which in the war referred to brought us so near to complete disaster. If Germany had started the latest phase of her submarine policy twelve or eighteen months earlier, probably we should have been reduced to surrender to her. Mr. Collings has more than once said to me he hopes the nation will remember—that it will never forget—the terrible plight she was in, and will lay her plans accordingly for the reconstruction of the agricultural position.

A Blue Book was issued in December, 1906, containing the Report of a Departmental Committee, presided over by Lord Onslow and appointed by the Board of Agriculture to inquire into and report upon the subject of small holdings. Mr. Collings was a member of the Committee. Although he could not sign the majority report, he added a separate one, expressing his views. In all the Committee had fifty-eight witnesses before them, and 10,990 questions were asked and answered. In his own report, Mr. Collings stated that he agreed with the recommendations of the Committee on the subject of agricultural education and on one or two other matters, but as some of the recommendations were, as he considered, of a retrograde character, and would create what he regarded as a barrier to the restoration of a peasant proprietary, he stated at some length his own views. His chief conclusions,

in order to deal effectively with the question under consideration by the Committee, were (briefly) as follows :

“ 1st.—A substantial sum should be placed at the disposal of the Board of Agriculture for the purpose of creating small holdings throughout the country. The terms, as to loans to small holders, to be such as to secure that poverty be no bar to suitable men acquiring the ownership of the land they till.

“ 2nd.—The Small Holdings Act of 1892 to be amended in the manner suggested above.

“ 3rd.—That as parliamentary grants are made to the Congested Districts (Ireland) Board, 1897, for (among other purposes) the ‘ creation of a body of small proprietors,’ so grants of a similar kind should be given to local authorities in England for the equipment of small holdings. Such grants-in-aid to be apportioned among the County Councils according to the liabilities which the Councils themselves have undertaken under the Act of 1892.

“ 4th.—I am convinced that if this policy were wisely and earnestly carried out, the evils of rural depopulation, referred to in the evidence, would be stayed, the tide of migration to towns be even turned back into an opposite direction, and the valuable class of peasant proprietors would steadily increase in number until it became not only an important factor in the economy of the nation, but also an addition to its strength and safety.”

The first two conclusions in the above have been adopted in the Land Settlement (Facilities) Act, 1919; and the third has been also adopted in a modified form, seeing that colonies of small holders are now being created under the Small Holdings (Colonies) Acts, which Acts, however, are worked mainly by the Ministry of Agriculture and not by local authorities.

## CHAPTER XXX

### MR. A. BALFOUR AND SOCIAL REFORM

1907-8. In January, 1907, Mr. Collings was in Jamaica on a visit, being accompanied by the late Sir Alfred Jones, the late Mr. Henniker Heaton, M.P., and others ; and whilst there an earthquake took place, which did a good deal of damage to buildings. Much distress was also caused in Kingston, where he was at the moment. Several of the party had been sitting on the front of the hotel under a heavy iron roof, which fell to the ground a few moments after they left it ; and, as they walked towards the hotel, the front fell forward. They were about a hundred yards either way of certain death. He, with others, found his legs wandering from under him, but beyond being thrown to the ground he met, though providentially, with no injury. Large numbers of the inhabitants, however, were killed and others maimed. Mr. Collings' birthday (January 9th) was spent on the boat whilst going between Barbados and Jamaica ; and, to his agreeable surprise, he was the subject of a presentation on behalf of his fellow-passengers, who presented him with a silver cigarette case. The Address accompanying it expressed good wishes,



and, what he not unnaturally particularly valued, cordial sympathy towards his work for rural reform. He was much struck with the enormous resources of the island, with regard more particularly to cotton and rubber.

In the early summer of 1907 he went, with some relatives, on a trip to France and the Touraine : and of the Rouen district which is noted for its cider he says, " I thought the cider very inferior to our Devonshire cider "—which is quite a delightful comment and I am sure expresses Mr. Collings' real opinion.

In this year, too, Mr. Collings introduced his Purchase of Land Bill under the " ten minutes " rule, and, after doing so, Mr. Ramsay Macdonald, then Socialist Member for Leicester, in some brief but querulous observations, said that economic forces had destroyed the classes of yeomen and peasant proprietors, and apparently that it was useless to revive them again. The statement is one which had been occasionally made by others whose general views were perhaps more entitled to respect.

Mr. Collings, however, characterised the statement " as sheer nonsense." " As a fact," he said, " the yeomen and peasant proprietors were destroyed by legislation ; and it is by legislation alone that they can be restored. Socialists object to the multiplication of private ownerships of land, whether the owners are actual cultivators or not, just as they object to the ownership of practically anything else."

“In Germany,” he truly declared, “it was the avowed object of the Marxists to capture the rural districts for their socialist policy. They were, however, defeated, and had to acknowledge their defeat. Individualism, in the form of millions of men who own and cultivate land, was and is too strong for them, and so it is to be hoped it will become in our country.”

The Agricultural Education Bill, in this year, secured a Second Reading, but unfortunately the Prime Minister (Mr. Asquith), although appealed to later on in the Session to do so, refused to give facilities for its further passage through Parliament—a proceeding which it was difficult to justify on the ground of precedent, more difficult to justify on the ground of policy, and which caused irritation and surprise amongst some at least of his ablest followers.

During the year the Government brought in and passed the Smallholdings and Allotments Act, and in the following year an Act with the same title was passed consolidating the existing legislation relative to small holdings and allotments. As the former measure gave no additional facilities to enable men to become occupying owners of small holdings, Mr. Collings not merely severely criticised the measure but he made very determined efforts on each stage of its progress to remove the obligation it contained on the part of would-be purchasers to pay down not less than one-fifth of the purchase

money on agreeing to purchase their holdings. This obligation, Mr. Collings urged, was the reason why previous legislation had been largely inoperative, and he declared that this "bar of poverty" should be removed. He told the Government that all over the country the Rural Labourers' League had been informed by its local agents and others that a working man who desired to own a small holding could not get it because he had to pay not less than the fifth of the purchase money alluded to: and the man was not able to do this after making provision for the purchase of his live and dead stock, etc. His contention could not be denied. The Government, however, on each occasion resisted his demand; Mr. Lewis Harcourt (now Viscount Harcourt)—who was in charge of the measure—declaring that the Government were inclined to give even less rather than greater facilities to working men to become the occupying owners of small holdings. Mr. Collings' efforts, therefore, for the time being, were defeated.

In August he attended the annual meetings of the British Association, where he initiated a discussion on the subject of peasant proprietorship and small holdings. Agricultural subjects, or rather those of the rural social kind, had not figured very largely at meetings of the Association, and Mr. Collings was glad to take this opportunity of stating before the scientific gentlemen who attended what his views were on a topic fast becoming increasingly important. He emphasised the views expressed in

these pages, and expressed the hope that learned societies generally would take a greater interest in rural topics than was commonly the case. "Nothing," he said, "but good can come of such a proceeding."

The following month Mr. Collings made a speech in which he felt it necessary to allude to the leadership of Mr. Arthur Balfour. In the course of his observations he stated that the party with which Mr. Balfour and himself were connected were at that moment "like men going through a wilderness without a Moses to lead them, and were chafing at the inaction to which they were condemned."

The speech, and especially the observation quoted, created a good deal of comment in the newspapers, and in some of these publications Mr. Collings was taken to task for his outspoken criticism. However, he was much dissatisfied with the small attention given by Mr. Balfour to social reforms, and it seemed in his view to be necessary that someone who was particularly interested in the matter should give expression to his views. Mr. Collings supported his criticism by stating that there would be two questions at the next General Election in which the public would feel the greatest interest, and which, if tackled in a right spirit, would secure that support in Parliament for reform which he felt to be necessary. These subjects were land reform and tariff reform.

"In his speech of August 16th, 1907," said Mr. Collings, "Mr. Balfour dealt with both these

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A SAMPLER

(See page 27)

questions. He said that sixty years ago the nation made its choice and decided that thenceforth the development of the country must be a manufacturing and not an agricultural development; he (Mr. Balfour) thought they were right in so doing; that we should logically accept the consequences of the acts of our forefathers; and that if Great Britain were to increase in wealth, population, and prosperity, that increase must, in the main, not be a rural but an urban increase. He (Mr. Balfour) went on to indicate his disbelief in the question of small holdings as even the beginning of a solution of the social problems around us. If Mr. Balfour's views are correct, then," Mr. Collings urged, "Heaven help our country; for it is difficult to find in all history a nation, however rich in aggregate wealth, that remained for long in the front rank after its agriculture had decayed and its rural population disappeared." In any case, Mr. Collings regarded Mr. Balfour's speech as "a cold douche on the efforts of those—the great majority of Mr. Balfour's own party—who believe in land reform and tariff reform on popular lines." Altogether Mr. Collings was, as he declared, forcibly reminded of a wise, ancient saying that "It is not good when he who carries the torch has at the same time also the way to seek."

Later on in the year, in other speeches dealing with the question of rural reform, Mr. Collings again, in much detail, discussed the question of urban industry and rural reform; as it seemed to him

desirable, in view of Mr. Balfour's opinion, to do so. For instance, at the Totnes and South Devon Chamber of Agriculture in October, he said, "What has been the position of agriculture? During the last thirty years its history has been deplorable. If there were time, I could show how much estimated capital the farmers have lost, how the prices of land have gone down to a half and to a quarter—to prices not found in any other country in Europe, whilst, as for the labourers, they have largely disappeared, which is a great misfortune to any country. People make light of this, and think that commercialism is going to save them.

"At the last census only 25 per cent of the population of the kingdom was rural. The nation cannot exist on that basis. It is not perhaps well known that many of our counties are almost a desert. If we take the rural districts, only, in forty-two of the counties, there are no longer above two hundred people to the square mile; in twelve, only one hundred, and in three there are positively only fifty to the square mile. My chief object has been this one question of rural reform, and its prosecution is the only reason that I remain in Parliament. I want you and the commercial classes to agree to one or two propositions. We want capital back to the land, because, invested in land, it has a far greater return than any similar amount of capital invested in commercial enterprises. If physical health and strength and the



increase of population are to be reckoned as national assets, then agriculture enriches the nation far more than any other undertaking. The home trade, the purchasing power of our fields for the development of agriculture, is far steadier than any foreign trade can be. Further, I have no hesitation in saying that unless we make an alteration in our rural and national economy we are on the downgrade as a nation. Agriculture is not only the biggest industry, but the mother of all industries. Everything we touch, eat, or handle comes from the earth, and if there is no agriculture there will be no trade." In the light of our war experiences and of the agricultural legislation for which Mr. Balfour—as one of the chief members of the Government passing it—was largely responsible, it is not easy to reconcile his views in 1907 with his more recent acts as a Minister.

In the autumn of 1907 Mr. Collings went on a holiday tour, in company with his son-in-law, Mr. H. C. Field, of Birmingham, to the West Indies, and he was much impressed with what he saw there.

He spent a good deal of time in Barbados, and subsequently proceeded by steamer to New York, where he spent some short time, and then crossed to Liverpool on the *Campania*.

Of this visit Mr. Collings says, "The West Indies are very beautiful islands, splendidly cultivated. The thing that struck me most was the very great and rapid development of the cotton-growing

industry. Sugar used to be the chief product, but, in the islands that are suited to it, cotton is now by far the most important thing grown. At the time I was there, the people were producing the very best quality, 'Sea Island' cotton, which sometimes fetched 1s. 3d. or 2s. per pound, almost double the price of ordinary cotton, and which, up till then, could only be obtained from America. They were planting more and more in Barbados, and getting splendid results. The Imperial Agricultural Department (a department of our Government) was doing most valuable work, under the direction of Sir Daniel Morris. Experiments were conducted as to the most suitable crops to be grown in the various localities, and the planters were very greatly helped with advice and information on all points. The headquarters of this department are in Barbados, and there are branch establishments in other parts of the islands. The British Cotton Growers' Association also was doing good work ; the cotton industry, in fact, promised greatly to increase the welfare of the West Indies.

“ The cultivation of cocoa and that of rubber are also flourishing industries, which had been greatly extended through the agency of the Imperial Agricultural Department. In fact, there seemed to be no limit to what these islands can produce in the form of tropical crops and products, and they contain abundant promise of the greatest prosperity. The cotton, in particular, produces large and almost



*Photo. H. F. Whitlock & Sons, Ltd.*

MR. JESSE COLLINGS IN 1908



immediate profits. The rubber, though it takes longer, gives a very satisfactory return.

“ I enjoyed the personal friendship of Mr. Marconi, of wireless telegraphy fame, and, whilst I was on the high seas, a little incident occurred which illustrated effectively the wonders of this system of communication. One of the wireless messages which the *Campania* despatched reached the *Tunisian*, of the Allan Line, on her way from Halifax to Liverpool, and then about 200 miles distant from the Cunarder. The *Tunisian* replied, and mentioned that they had on board Mr. Marconi himself. On hearing this, I caused a telegram to be despatched wishing him a ‘Happy New Year.’ Within seven or eight minutes, the compliment was reciprocated. With the exception of a few days at New York, my shore visits were practically confined to the island of Barbados.”

In August and September, 1908, he went, with some relatives, on a tour via Cologne and the Rhine to the Engadine, North Italy, and Switzerland, visiting Cologne, Heidelberg, Falls of Neuhausen, Zurich, Pontresina, Bellagio, Como Lugano, Lake Maggiore, Baveno, Milan, St. Gothard, Lucerne, and other places. The tour was a most interesting one, which he and his party much enjoyed.

Mr. Collings was both congratulated and “chaffed” upon his boldness in occupying the Speaker’s chair for a short time while the Licensing Bill was in Committee in 1908. He explained, however, afterwards that he was simply asserting an ancient

privilege that belongs to every member of the House—namely to occupy “this comfortable and commodious seat if he thinks fit, when it is vacant.” In years gone by, he added, “it was an ordinary thing for members to exercise this privilege, but it has latterly been neglected, and probably not one in twenty members of the House knows of its existence.” He deemed it his duty to call renewed attention to it; and he induced other veteran members to follow his example, among these being Sir Francis Powell and Mr. John Talbot.

## CHAPTER XXXI

### A JOURNEY TO FRANCE: AN UNFORTUNATE ACCIDENT

1909. In March, 1909, Mr. Collings attended, not for the first but unfortunately for the last time the very important and illuminating annual meetings of the French Agricultural Society, of which he is a Life Member. It was on his return from this visit that he slipped from the icy footboard of the train on its arrival in Charing Cross Station, London, and, falling upon the platform, fractured one of his hips, from which time onward he has only been able to walk with the aid of assistance. This accident greatly incapacitated him in his movements—both in Parliament and out; he was, in fact, and most unfortunately, at once and permanently cut off from many activities.

The meetings in France lasted for eight days, during which time numerous questions connected with agriculture were fully discussed, and resolutions respecting them were passed. The agricultural show also took place during the same period. The show, as usual, was a very fine one, the exhibition of cattle, sheep, pigs, etc., being particularly remarkable.

The popular day was Sunday (March 22nd); and of far more interest to Mr. Collings than the show itself was the multitude of peasant proprietors who visited the exhibition and his conversations with numbers of them. These men, in their homely suits—and for the most part accompanied by their wives and daughters—showed, he told me often, an intense interest in everything connected with the exhibition.

The annual banquet of the Society was held on the Sunday evening, and about 300 members attended. The Marquis de Vogue, the President of the Society, presided, and Mr. Collings had a place by his side. During the evening he was called upon by the President to speak. Addressing the meeting in their own language, he said :

“ Mr. President and Gentlemen,—I thank you heartily for the generous sentiments which you have expressed. I love to visit your charming country, and especially the rural districts of it. It is a great pleasure to me to know that the relations between the two countries—not only between the two Governments, but between the two peoples—are most cordial. I ardently hope that they will remain so, not only for the welfare of the two nations themselves, but also because the peace and welfare of Europe depend largely on the *entente cordiale* between France and England. Our beloved King Edward is, for the moment, a prisoner in your country—a voluntary prisoner—held by the bonds of your fine climate, by the sun which we sometimes see in



England, and by the pleasure of being in the midst of an agreeable people. I hope that he will return with renewed health for the active discharge of those responsibilities which he and all the Royal Family of England are so ready to undertake.

“ I have had much pleasure in assisting at the general meetings of your Society, and also at those of the various ‘ sections.’ It is interesting to me to make a comparison between your great Society and the principal Agricultural Society with us, viz. the Royal Agricultural Society, of which your President is a member. They are both great Societies ; but I note an important difference. The Royal Agricultural Society of England is composed, for the most part, of great proprietors with lands of such immensity as happily are not commonly to be found in France. It is also composed of farmers who are nearly always tenants, with a yearly tenancy ; but we have, unfortunately, very few farmers, great or small, who cultivate their own farms. Owing to this latter cause it seems to me that your agricultural societies are more diverse in their operations than ours, and more useful to agriculture generally. Your system of proprietorship, to my mind, is much better than ours in the interests of the social condition of the country. As M. Tisserand (a former President of your Society), in a speech made a few years ago, said : ‘ On the prosperity of agriculture depend the fortunes of the country ; and whatever

adds to the welfare of the rural population is one of the best means by which the Government may assure the stability of our institutions, as well as the greatness and power of our country.' Further, M. Meline (a former President of the Department of Agriculture) said, in his book recently published, *The Return to the Land*, 'The prosperity of a country is like unto a tree. Agriculture is its root ; Industry and Commerce are the branches and the leaves. If the root decays, the leaves fall, the branches drop away, and the tree dies.' These words are very striking, but they are very true.

" I, an Englishman, must apologise for presuming to give advice to Frenchmen ; but may I say that the whole of the urban population—those engaged in commerce and manufacture, as well as the workmen—will be wise and far-seeing if they do all that is possible to advance the prosperity of agriculture. To do this will be acting in the best interests ; because agriculture is not an ordinary industry, but is the base, the mother, of *all* industries.

" In the eloquent speech with which your President opened the meetings of your Society a few days ago there is a sentence which makes me somewhat sad, inasmuch as it brings home to me the different state of things which exists in my own country. The President said : ' Agriculture is charged with the duty of nourishing the country. It has succeeded by its own power in securing the daily bread of the nation '—a sure pledge for the security of the

country and of its independence. We English, on the contrary, depend on commerce mainly for our wealth, and on the foreigner for our daily bread.

“ I thank you, gentlemen, for the patience and attention which you have given me. I heartily hope that your Society will continue in prosperity ; that it will be faithful to its proud traditions ; and that it will be powerful enough to influence public opinion in favour of agriculture, and thus to secure legislation conformable to the interests of this grand and pre-eminent industry.”

The question of land reform in England was now more than ever being dragged into the party political arena, and the Liberal party supported the tenancy of holdings as against ownership. This support (which was really new to the Liberal party) was due to the fact that some thirty Labour members of urban type had been returned to Parliament, and were opposed to small holders becoming occupying owners. As a party leader Mr. Asquith doubtless knew the value to himself of the votes of the members in question. In his speech (at Earlston), speaking in defence of the principle of tenancies as against that of ownerships, he was reported to have said : “ The magic of property, such as it is, is derived, not from ownership, but from security.” He assumed, as Lord Carrington (Liberal President of the Board of Agriculture) and others about this time constantly assumed, that the “ security ” was given by the consolidated Small Holdings Act of

1908, already referred to. That Act, however, gave neither fixity of rent nor security of tenure. Mr. Collings urged that it passed the wit of man to "frame any just measure on the tenancy principle which shall secure these two conditions." They could be, in his opinion, secured by ownership, and in no other way. "No doubt," he said, "small holders and their successors under the Act may continue for a period of years to be tenants of county councils, which, however, are changing bodies, and, like all corporations, are not ideal landlords."

The great expenses connected with the Act—cost of management, sinking fund, etc.—would, Mr. Collings pointed out—and such was actually the case—make the rent of the holdings far in excess of the amount of the annual instalments that peasant proprietors would have been required to pay under a system of purchase—which instalments, moreover, after a period of years, would cease altogether.

Mr. Asquith went on to state that the problem of depopulation "is not an insoluble one," and, in support of this contention, he had the unfortunate boldness to cite the case of Denmark. He could not possibly have given a case more subversive of his own theories. "At the beginning of last century," Mr. Collings pointed out, "the land tenure of Denmark had all the evils which belong to that of our own. By a series of Acts of the Danish Legislature, extending up to recent times, tenancies have

been gradually replaced by ownerships, until now above 85 per cent of the cultivators own the land they till. No economist or statesman in Denmark will ascribe the great prosperity of that little country to any other cause than this. The same remarks apply to the several States of Germany ; as well as to France and other countries." In seeking to found a system of tenancies, Mr. Asquith was, he once more urged, flying in the face of the experience of almost every country in Europe. "The pressing need of our own nation is," he stated, "to restore a permanent population to its countryside ; and this can only be done in fixing men on the soil by the ties—economic, social, and sentimental—of personal ownership."

In October, 1909, Mr. Collings was the happy recipient of an illuminated address and album handed to him at his home at Edgbaston, Birmingham, by Mr. Joseph Chamberlain. The album contained the actual signatures of some 5000 or more agricultural workers from every county in England ; and the address was as follows :

“ TO THE RIGHT HONOURABLE JESSE COLLINGS,  
M.P., President of the Rural Labourers’  
League.

“ We, the undersigned agricultural labourers, small holders, and other workers and residents in the rural districts, hereunder mentioned, desire to congratulate you upon entering on the twenty-first

year of your presidency of the Rural Labourers' League.

“Very many of us occupy allotments and small holdings through the advocacy of and the assistance gratuitously rendered to us by the Rural Labourers' League, of which you were the founder; whilst some thousands of other village workers have—as we learn from the League's reports issued during the past twenty years—also received similar aid and with similar results. We thank you for this voluntary and national work by which the nation benefits, and in which we recognise in practical form some part at least of that faithful service which, throughout a long and honourable life, you have rendered, both inside and outside of Parliament, towards improving the condition of the village population of the kingdom.

“We also desire to seize the opportunity of congratulating you upon having reached the fiftieth anniversary of your wedded life, and to offer to you and to Mrs. Jesse Collings our sincere wishes for a continuance of the enjoyment of many years of health and happiness.

“With the further expression of the hope that you may be spared many years in which to carry on your useful labours,

“We are, with great respect and esteem,

“Your faithful and obedient servants.”

The signatures then follow.

Mr. Collings at the time was suffering a great deal of pain from his accident, but was supposed to be recovering. The sending of this handsome address to him—and through one with whom he had been for so many years in intimate association, and who had done much to help forward the cause Mr. Collings espoused—was a touching and comforting incident, and one to which Mr. Collings looks back with much pleasure.

## CHAPTER XXXII

### THE RURAL LEAGUE: LAND BANKS: TWO PRESENTATIONS

1910-12. In 1910 the Rural Labourers' League changed its name to that of the Rural League, so as to include within its scope of operations all classes in the rural districts interested in land reform. The course adopted was a reasonable one, and it was in accordance with the spirit of the times, which was increasingly showing a greater interest in the land question.

An important manifesto was issued on April 12th, by Mr. Collings as President of the League.

“The question,” he said therein, “of restoring the two classes of peasant proprietors and yeomen farmers is now generally regarded as part of the programme of the Unionist party. This policy is contained in a concrete form in my Purchase of Land Bill, which has been before Parliament for some years, and which has been reintroduced this Session. The Bill has been accepted by the leading agricultural associations. It has been examined by the agricultural section of the Tariff Reform Commission; and the Committee of that section, of which Mr. Chaplin is chairman, has, after referring to it in



detail, fully adopted it. The agents of the Rural League for some years past, and especially during the last General Election, have brought the proposals before several thousands of rural meetings, and, without an exception, they have been unanimously approved." He then explained for a special reason which will immediately appear that the principle of the Bill was to enable the State, acting through the Board of Agriculture, to advance money on approved terms to those desiring to become the occupying cultivators. On almost all occasions on which the subject had been dealt with at the meetings referred to, *the credit of the State* had been enlarged upon as the best, cheapest, and most effective agency to carry out the work. "This view," he said, "has been accepted, and is in the minds of agriculturists throughout the country. Quite recently, however, a proposition for the first time has been made that the advances for the purchase should be made by a mortgage *land bank* instead of by the State. It would be a misfortune if such a proposition as this were adopted." He next called together a meeting of the Unionist party (to which he belonged) to discuss the subject of this proposition to which he was absolutely opposed. The meeting was held on April 14th, 1910, in the House of Commons. He was voted to the chair, and the meeting, which was attended by Mr. Balfour (the leader of the party), Mr. Austen Chamberlain, and over one hundred other members, was of an enthusiastic character.

Great importance was attached by all present at the meeting to the increase of small cultivating ownerships, both by assisting sitting tenants to purchase their holdings when they came into the market, and by establishing new men as cultivating owners with the assistance of *the State*.

Mr. Balfour took part in the discussion, and, after paying a warm tribute to what he termed Mr. Collings' "life-long devotion to the cause," he developed the ideas which (much to Mr. Collings' gratification) he had lately come to express in a speech at Birmingham, in favour of such ownerships. A discussion ensued, in which numerous members took part, and the following resolution, moved by Mr. Beville Stanier,<sup>1</sup> and seconded by Colonel Sanders, was unanimously carried :

"That this meeting of Unionist members is in favour of Mr. Balfour's policy of creating an extended system of cultivating ownerships in land, and that, without desiring to commit him or the meeting to all the details of any scheme for carrying out this policy, expresses its strong desire that the cultivators should be given *the most favourable terms possible* for the repayment of moneys advanced on their behalf."

The position was thus cleared up by this meeting, and was satisfactory to Mr. Collings, who contended that the creation of a Land Bank to advance the money for, and to do the work of, land purchase would have resulted in directors' fees and the charge of a

<sup>1</sup> Now (1920) Sir Beville Stanier, Bart.

higher interest, both of which would have to be paid by the cultivating owners whom he was seeking to create. He objected strongly to the policy, and he was glad, of course, to secure its defeat. His prompt action in the matter was characteristic.

In July, 1911, Mr. Collings attended a special meeting of the Birmingham City Council, when he was presented with the Freedom of the City, the Lord Mayor presiding. This was a very happy occasion for him, as it proved, not for the first time, the kindness and interest of his Birmingham friends in his public work. The Lord Mayor, in concluding his references to Mr. Collings' work for the city, said: "In political matters, the whirligig of time brings many changes, but throughout them all you have remained a true friend of this city, and it is because of this long-continued service and devotion to the causes of popular and social betterment that the city, through me, offers you the right hand of fellowship as an honorary freeman and I have the pleasure of handing you an illuminated copy of the resolution, a casket for the reception of which is being made."

Mr. Collings was also the recipient, in the same month, of an illuminated address, and Mrs. Collings of a handsome pendant, presented to them by his constituents of the Bordesley Division of Birmingham on his having completed twenty-five years' service as Member of Parliament for that Division.

In this year (1911) Lord Carrington, President

of the Board of Agriculture, appointed a Departmental Committee (known as the Haversham Committee) to consider the position of tenant farmers whose farms were being sold over their heads in consequence of the breaking-up of estates. The Committee, in their report, made two main recommendations to protect the farmer from the consequences of a change of ownership. The first recommendation was for the adoption of a scheme brought forward by the late Sir Edward Holden (a member of the Committee) to enable the farmer, in case of sale, to purchase his holding. Under this scheme it was proposed to establish a Land Bank of a very novel kind, it being composed of directors only and no shareholders. The capital of the Bank was to consist of £500,000 advanced on loan by the State at  $3\frac{1}{4}$  per cent. In addition to this small capital the Bank was authorised to issue bonds bearing interest at  $3\frac{1}{4}$  per cent, or at such other interest—higher if necessary—as would cause them to be taken up. The interest on these bonds—the issue of which did not appear to be limited—was to be guaranteed by the State. The Bank was to be managed by eight directors. Presumably some at least of these directors were to be paid, though it was not so stated.

Mr. Collings again promptly condemned this proposal for a Land Bank.

It was suggested that the Bank should advance to those who wanted to buy their farms four-fifths

of the purchase money, at 4 per cent interest, the sum so advanced to be repaid by instalments in 75 years. The remaining fifth of the purchase money the tenants had to find for themselves. A striking commentary on this last proposal is the fact that the bulk of the witnesses, and it appears the Committee themselves, were of opinion that, except in rare cases, such was just what the tenants could not do!

Mr. Collings pointed out that the tenants could not raise money on their farms, seeing that the farms would be already mortgaged up to 80 per cent of their value. The only possible way open to them was to take the sum required from their working capital. It must have been evident, he said, to everyone that "few if any tenant farmers are so flush of money as to be able to abstract from their working capital such a large sum as 20 per cent of the total value of their farms. If they *could* do so it would be disastrous to agriculture, which is already so much under-capitalised, and would make it impossible for the purchasing tenants to pay the heavy annual instalments required under the scheme." Included in these instalments, besides interest and sinking fund, was a  $\frac{1}{2}$  per cent for management of the Bank.

In addition to these drawbacks there were a number of conditions imposed on the purchasing tenants, not one of which would be necessary under a fair and practicable purchase scheme such as that

propounded by Mr. Collings himself in his Purchase of Land Bill.

“Again,” and with some warmth, he said, “Sir Edward Holden is a banker with great financial experience. From the Banker’s point of view the scheme may be safe and satisfactory, but it seems to me that under it the British farmer is to be exploited, not by the State, but by the ‘middleman’ in the form of a financial institution. He is, in short, to be handed over to the moneylender.”

To these proposals, which he regarded as impracticable, the Committee put forward an alternative or supplementary scheme—“a scheme,” he declared, “which would delight the Socialist Party, and which might have been proposed even by the Fabian Society.” The recommendation was that the State should buy up large estates, taking the place of the landlords, and then let the farms, of which these estates are composed, to the sitting tenants. Five members of the Committee dissented from these proposals on the ground that it would “lead to land nationalisation,” but Mr. Collings’ contention was that it would, in fact, be land nationalisation. “It is,” he added, “the scheme of Henry George with the following difference. That gentleman proposed to rob and abolish the landlords by taxing them up to 20s. in the pound. The Committee propose that the State should pay the landlords for the land it takes, but it would have to recoup itself by rents paid by tenants, who will thus have to pay

for farms which they will not be permitted to possess."

Sir Edward Holden's scheme and the scheme of the Committee never got any farther ; but the mere promulgation of such proposals (for which the cultivator who had never asked for them was to be called upon to pay) did not make easier Mr. Collings' task of advocating the adoption of what he regarded as a sound system of State-aided occupying owner-ships.

## CHAPTER XXXIII

### THE HOUSE OF COMMONS: "NUNC DIMITTIS"

1912-13. On February 23rd, 1912, in the House of Commons, Mr. Beville Stanier moved, at Mr. Collings' desire, the following amendment to the Address :

" But this House humbly regrets that, seeing the unsatisfactory position of British tenants through what is called the breaking-up of estates, no measure is announced in Your Majesty's Gracious Speech for extending the benefits enjoyed by Irish farmers under the Act of 1903 to British tenants, thereby enabling them to purchase their farms by State aid whenever such farms are for sale ; and this House further regrets that no measure is announced for enabling agricultural labourers and other suitable persons to become occupying owners of small holdings of land."

Mr. Stanier dealt with the subject in a manner at once sympathetic and able, and Mr. Collings felt great pleasure at his undertaking the task, as he (Mr. Stanier) was also at the time Chairman of the Executive Committee of the Rural League, which position he continued to occupy until the dissolution of the organisation in December, 1919.



Mr. Collings seconded the motion, and it was most ably supported by a number of other members of the House. On this occasion, after stating the arguments which he had over and over again, in one form or another, brought before the House and the nation in previous years, he concluded his observations with the following interesting and striking words :

“ I cannot help contrasting the position of this question now with the position it occupied when I first entered the House. I remember speaking from the benches opposite some twenty-six years ago. I introduced the first Bill for the purchase of land with the aid of the State. (Hear, hear.) It was received as a joke, with a good deal of good-humoured banter, with cries of ‘ Three acres and a cow,’ and other things. The question, however, has survived the stage of ridicule ; it has gone through the state of indifference ; it is now in the front rank of practical politics, and the name of the statesman who shall carry it out will be handed down as one—I am not exaggerating—who has saved the country. . . . I hope to see it passed, and then I shall be content, so far as my political career is concerned, to say *Nunc Dimittis*.” The speech was a moving one, and was heartily cheered ; especially as Mr. Collings was still suffering pain and great inconvenience from the accident already referred to.

The amendment was defeated by a majority of 56 in a House consisting of 320 members, Mr.

Runciman, President of the Board of Agriculture, speaking against it on behalf of the Liberal Government.

In another seven years or so, however, what a change was to take place !

In October, 1912, the Report of the proceedings of the Dominions Royal Commission on the subject of emigration was published. It was one, as Mr. Collings said at the time, which should arrest the attention of everyone who was interested in the safety and security of our country.

Sir Albert Spicer, a member of the Commission, stated that what the Colonies wanted was the best of our agricultural labourers, but that we had no more of this class than we wanted at home. He, however, advocated an organised scheme for sending our young people across the sea. As if they were goods and chattels to be exported carriage paid, he said that we "might deliver these boys in the Dominions free of cost." A deputation from the Standing Committee of the Royal Colonial Institute attended the Commission and advocated the formation of a special organisation for the purpose of emigration, the expenses of which were to be paid by the Government ; "in other words, the shipping away," as Mr. Collings said, "of the best of our people was to receive State recognition and be aided out of the public purse !" He added in a further criticism : "There are between forty and fifty private emigration societies in this country, some of

them carrying on a large and lucrative trade by exporting our fellow-citizens. Most of them receive subsidies from shipping agents, railway agents, and Colonial Government agents, who are financially interested in the trade, and whose shameful 'touting' advertisements are the main cause of the excessive emigration taking place at this time and before it." The deputation referred to advocated the giving of further aid to these emigration societies in the form of a grant of so much per head of the emigrants they sent oversea. "No Government," replied Mr. Collings, "with any regard for the national welfare could adopt such a monstrous proposal. To do so would be an open acknowledgment that the system on which our national economy is based is a false one, and has broken down. It must be remembered that only the best, the most healthy, and the choicest of our productive workers are acceptable as emigrants; the others are left at home to propagate their kind. About 300,000 persons of British nationality and of the quality named are annually leaving our shores." It was, he thought, for the promoters of emigration to say what effect this continuous drain on the life-blood of the nation would have. He was not opposed to the surplus population emigrating or those who voluntarily wished to emigrate, but he was opposed to the policy of forcing emigration of our rural people of whom we had not one to spare.

There was at least one Minister of the Crown who

fully realised the consequences of the excessive emigration and who would give no State encouragement to it. Mr. John Burns, for example, told the Colonial Conference that "though they were entitled to the overflow, they must not empty the cistern," and that "crowded emigrant ships were no compensation for empty cradles."

In June, 1913, Lord Lansdowne, a Vice-President of the Rural League and one whose sympathies for and efforts on behalf of our rural classes, and not least on behalf of the agricultural workers, are not exceeded by those of any other landowner, made, by special desire, a very notable speech on the question of land reform when he addressed a meeting at Matlock Bath, with the Duke of Rutland in the chair. The speech was a very able one, and would well repay, even now, reading by those who wish to ascertain the views of a great and sympathetic landowner on behalf of the cause of rural reform. Lord Lansdowne was a Vice-President of the Rural League and of its immediate predecessor (the Rural Labourers' League) from their commencement; he took the chair at more than one of the annual meetings of the League; he was and is a strong believer in the policy of occupying ownership; and he more than once advocated State-aid as a means to its accomplishment. Mr. Collings has always felt grateful to Lord Lansdowne for the valuable efforts he repeatedly put forth on behalf of this policy, and he desires me to state that fact here.

## CHAPTER XXXIV

### A CREDITABLE WAR ACHIEVEMENT

1914-18. During the interregnum caused by the War<sup>1</sup> the work of Mr. Collings and of the Rural League in connection with rural reform had to remain in abeyance. No legislation other than that directly connected with the War was possible, and the Bills of private members were all dropped for the time being. By the special desire of Mr. Collings, however, the League from the beginning to the close of the War was very deeply engaged in various schemes and work of national importance, and he himself was active in giving all possible advice and assistance. The widespread and unique character of the organisation, in fact, was quickly realised by the Government and their advisers, who sought the League's aid ; and its War record is, as readers will doubtless agree, an extremely creditable one.

The first way in which the League assisted the Government was in canvassing for and in obtaining many thousands of recruits from the rural districts

<sup>1</sup> Early in the year (1914) Mr. Collings wrote and published *The Colonisation of Rural Britain*, a remarkable two-volume work containing reflections and suggestions on rural reform and matters cognate to it.

for the New Armies which were to be created at the suggestion of the War Minister, the late Lord Kitchener. The Army Council subsequently officially wrote to thank the League for its efforts.

The success of the League's work in this direction was responsible for a later request, from Lord Derby, for similar help in connection with his Group Scheme for recruits. It was rendered with equal willingness, and the League was again officially thanked for its services.

In the early months of 1915 Mr. Collings wrote and published *The Great War: Its Lessons and Its Warnings*. This was a small book, the object of which was to awaken the minds of the people to the importance of agriculture, especially as we were at war, and to show that that great industry was the only safe basis on which the economy of the nation could rest. The whole edition was sold in a few months, from which it was augured that the nation was at last being aroused to the peril which had been brought about through the neglect of agriculture—a peril which was now becoming acute owing to the gigantic war in which we were engaged.

For many years before the War the League had made a close study of the question of village industries. Although the average villager was supposed by many people to be deficient in enterprise and knowledge, there was always convincing evidence that there was a great deal of latent talent among the rural population which only needed develop-

ment and direction to enable the possessors of it to make saleable articles of one kind and another equally as satisfactory in quality and ingenuity as the numerous articles made by the peasantry abroad, which articles were largely exported to our country. A singular opportunity was given by the War to test this matter.

After carefully reviewing and considering the whole of the circumstances, the Committee, at a meeting held at the House of Commons on February 16th, 1915, adopted—on Mr. Collings' suggestion—the scheme propounded by myself as Secretary of the League, with the view to giving effect to the project.

At the beginning many and great difficulties were experienced in carrying out the project, but the results completely justified Mr. Collings' and the Committee's faith in and the labour and expenditure devoted to the movement. Goods<sup>1</sup> were constantly made in the villages and received at the Head Offices of the League, from thirty counties, and the value of the orders remitted to different branches and individual workers amounted in some cases to close on £200 per branch or individual during a twelvemonth, apart altogether from amounts these branches or individuals received when themselves selling direct to traders, and which were very often of greater annual sums. Altogether some 264 firms in 146 towns, or 40 counties were, by 1917, taking goods made under the League's

<sup>1</sup> Fancy leather goods, wooden and stuffed toys, baskets, etc. etc.

auspices, whilst export orders were received from South Africa, America, Australia, etc.

In that year, however—in consequence of the national demand for labour for the War—the Committee were compelled seriously to consider the relation of the movement to the national situation due to the War. It was then resolved not to start any new branches or to add to the number of rural workers already engaged in the movement. Later in the year, the Labour situation having become acute, and in consequence of a communication received from the Director of National Service, the Committee again reviewed the position, with the result that they felt that it was their duty to fall into line with the request distinctly made to them by the Minister of National Service and the Minister of Agriculture, that all forms of labour should, as far as possible, be diverted to national war service. The cottagers were thereupon requested by the League to engage in munition, aeroplane, food production, or some other useful form of national service.

The League had, however, proved that the movement for the creation and establishment of village domestic industries could be run with success; which was its object. Further, it had impressed on those charged with the duty of inquiring into the terms of the re-settlement of the land, the urgent need for linking-up subsidiary village industries with the small holdings movement, as to which some



further remarks will be found both in the Evidence and in the Report of the "Selborne Committee."<sup>1</sup>

As soon as the foregoing village industries movement was, by the Government's desire, discontinued for the reason mentioned, the League was asked by the Government to work in conjunction with the Government's Food Production Department in assisting to increase the home-grown supplies of food. It willingly and at once complied.

It was felt that most useful work could be done in organising rural cottagers and allotment holders to grow more potatoes and to form live stock clubs, particularly for the keeping of pigs. This work was undertaken by the League at a critical stage, as not only were supplies of human food of every description short, but the special difficulties of getting seed, foodstuffs for the live stock, etc., were accumulating.

The League gave most careful consideration to the problem confronting it, which led to its schemes being conducted with a success that evoked most cordial official acknowledgment both from the Minister of Agriculture (Mr. R. E. Prothero, M.P., now Lord Ernle) and the Director-General of the Food Production Department (Sir Arthur Lee, now Lord Lee of Fareham).

Over four hundred pig and other live stock clubs—

<sup>1</sup> Agricultural Policy Sub-Committee of the Reconstruction Committee appointed in August, 1916. *Report*, dated 30th January (Cd. 9079, price 1s. 3d.; *Evidence* 9080, price 1s. 3d.). Chairman: The Earl of Selborne, K.G., a Vice-President of the Rural League.

amongst the cottager population—were started by the League during 1918. These clubs had an average membership of thirty, and as each member, also on the average, kept at least two pigs (in many cases it was four or more), it meant that 24,000 pigs, many of which were sows, were being kept in this organised way that would not otherwise have been kept. This was equal to at least 480,000 lbs. of pig meat. The League had some right to be proud of this record ; and, as a fact, the Minister of Agriculture subsequently wrote to congratulate the League “ for all it has done in the cause of food production.”

Another scheme in which the League engaged at the request of the Board of Agriculture was that of encouraging both urban and rural householders to go in for the keeping of tame rabbits (known as “ utility ” rabbits), primarily as a means of adding to the meat supply of the country ; and the League’s efforts resulted in a very large number of such rabbits being kept.

When, as was the case, the situation with regard to flour for bread-making purposes became acute, the League, through one of its village cottager correspondents who was accustomed to make his own bread, had a number of loaves made partly from flour and partly from potatoes. A mixture of this kind used to be in fairly common use in the rural districts, but it had become much less so during the last thirty to forty years, whilst it had been entirely superseded in urban districts by wheaten

flour, and there was great reluctance to resume acquaintance with it—especially on the part of bakers. The League's experiments were designed to show the cheapness, the healthfulness, and the economy of the bread. Samples of the loaves made were sent to several members of the Government, to other prominent and influential people, and to the Ministry of Food (established during the War), the last being asked to urge the public to make and use such bread, a course which the Ministry took on more than one occasion. The recipe from which the loaves were made was printed as a leaflet, of which many thousands were circulated. It was also printed in very many newspapers; and a large number of private householders adopted the recipe.

At Mr. Collings' earnest desire, I gave evidence before two Departmental Committees during the War, viz.—(1) Before the Departmental Committee on the "Settlement and Employment of Sailors and Soldiers on the Land"; and (2) before the Agricultural Policy Sub-Committee of the Reconstruction Committee (previously referred to).

The evidence given, I am pleased to know, was not without effect. For instance, the Sub-Committee in question, after praising the work of the League, and citing several times from the evidence in question, concluded a most able Report with, among others, the following definite recommendations, all of which were contained in such evidence, namely:

1. That greater facilities for purchase of small

holdings should be given to small holders desirous of owning their own land.

2. That the principle of purchase contained in Mr. Jesse Collings' "Purchase of Land Bill" should be adopted.

3. That distinct grants for the development of rural industries should be given.

4. That an improved rural curriculum for elementary schools should be laid down; that better prospects for teachers should be provided in rural districts; and that the expenditure on agricultural education should be largely increased.

## CHAPTER XXXV

### CONCLUSION

1918-19. As previously stated nothing whatever was done—nothing could be done—during the War to introduce or press forward in Parliament any measures of the character indicated in these pages. Land Reform, however, was discussed by public men, both from the point of view of the millions of those who at the War had become accustomed to an open-air life and of the future safety of the food supply of the country.

The Armistice was signed on November 11th, 1918; Ministers thereafter began to wind up the session; and a General Election took place in the following month.

Both immediately before and during this Election, definite pledges were given by Mr. Lloyd George and by Mr. Bonar Law that the Coalition Government which it was proposed to form would, if returned to power, introduce measures for the restoration of agriculture and the revivifying of village life.

In a formal Statement, for example, of the policy and aims of the Coalition party, issued on December 5th, 1918, it was declared that "the Government have

ready great schemes, necessarily involving a large expenditure of public money, for the purchase of land for soldiers who desire to earn a living in cultivation. There will be provided for ex-Service men:—(1) small holdings, (2) cottage sites and garden-holdings, (3) allotments. Provision has also been made for building houses; money has been set aside for the provision of equipment, and for the cultivation of the land; and credit will be provided on easy terms for the stocking of land. Facilities will be provided to enable tenants to purchase their holdings.”

The League communicated with the Prime Minister (Mr. Lloyd George) before this Statement was issued, and asked him to include in it satisfactory references to cottage holdings and to the purchase by tenants of their holdings.

The Statement brought clearly within close view the acceptance of reforms for which Mr. Collings had been striving for so many years, but, as will be seen from the narrative of ensuing events, the adoption of the principle and policy of occupying ownership by State aid—which was the point at issue—was still not secured in the way desired without a great deal of anxiety and effort.

The General Election in December, 1918, resulted in the formation of a Coalition Ministry, with Mr. Lloyd George as Prime Minister.

From that moment onwards, as, indeed, during the General Election, the Rural League took energetic

steps in the Press and in the constituencies to promote the principle and policy alluded to.

The new Parliament met on February 4th, 1919. The Land Settlement (Facilities) Bill was presented to the House on the 28th March, 1919.

The Committee of the League, to fortify their position, promptly initiated an inquiry among its many village agents as to their views on the policy of land reform, and as these views were still emphatically in favour of facilities being provided for occupiers and would-be occupiers to purchase small holdings and to do so by means of terminable State annuities—the principle of Mr. Collings' Purchase of Land Bill—the Committee of the League carefully examined the Bill to see if and how far this principle had been adopted by the Government. The Bill did not give these facilities; and steps, therefore, were at once taken with the view to securing its amendment in the sense desired.

An amendment was drafted by myself, owing to Mr. Collings' inability to do so through illness. Of this he and the Committee approved. It was to enable a tenant of a County Council small holding to have the option, at any time during his tenancy, of purchasing his holding from the Council; the whole of the purchase money to be payable by means of an annuity, and this annuity to be fixed at the lowest rate which would secure the Treasury against loss. This amendment was also brought by me before the newly-formed Agricultural Committee of the House

of Commons—a large and influential group of members—and, after considerable argument and insistence on my part of the importance of adopting the terminable annuity principle, they approved of it. It was also circulated—together with a detailed and critical statement of the whole position—among other members of Parliament and other influential public men interested in rural reform.

The Bill, as the next step, came before Standing Committee D of the House of Commons, when the amendment was moved by Captain Pretyma, a member of the Committee of the League. It was resisted, but, to avoid a Division on the question (when it was very confidently believed the amendment would have been carried), a promise was made officially that the whole question should be reconsidered before the Report Stage of the Bill.

The Bill came up for Report in the House of Commons on the 22nd July, when, as nothing had been done to it by the Government to meet the views of the League, Sir Beville Stanier, Bart., the Chairman of the Executive Committee of the League, at once moved the following amendment, which is the one already referred to, viz.

“ 3. (a) Subject to the approval of the Board of Agriculture and Fisheries, a tenant of a small holding shall have the option at any time during his tenancy of purchasing his holding from the Council, and, if the tenant so desires, the purchase money shall be paid by means of a purchase annuity which



shall be fixed by the Treasury and the annuity shall be calculated at the lowest rate which will, in the opinion of the Treasury, secure the Treasury against loss.

“(b) The purchase annuity shall be paid until the whole of the advance is ascertained, in a manner prescribed by the Treasury, to have been paid; and the terms of purchase shall also include such other terms as are not inconsistent with this section.”

A debate ensued, and the Parliamentary Secretary to the Board of Agriculture himself testified that he believed “that possession (of land) is a good thing, it tends to induce good cultivation”; but, nevertheless, he was compelled to announce that it was not possible for him to accept the amendment on behalf of the Government. Seeing, however, that the sense of the House was in support of the amendment (as had been that of the Standing Committee) he stated that he would again consult the President of the Board of Agriculture, and he added, “I will see whether it is possible for him to put something down in the way of an amendment in another place” (i.e. in the House of Lords). On this understanding, the Report and Third Reading Stages of the Bill were allowed to proceed by those in charge of the amendment.

Prior to the Bill coming before the House of Lords, on July 31st, I interviewed Lord Malmesbury, a Vice-President of the League, who undertook to move, if necessary, the amendment in that House.

This he did, on the Committee stage of the Bill on August 6th, and a Division was taken upon it. The result was a tie, and although the Chairman had voted *for* the amendment, yet by "ancient custom" his second vote had necessarily to be cast against it. Thus the amendment was lost—so far—by one vote. I then saw Lord Selborne, another Vice-President of the League—who had already spoken strongly in favour of the amendment on August 6th—and he advised me to get it brought up again. I thereupon saw several other members of the House of Lords whom I had reason to think sympathised with the League's position in the matter; and Earl Grey, of Howick, one of these, most readily consented to do what was necessary. The points were explained to him, and he had the amendment re-drafted by a draftsman of legal experience. He then brought the amendment, in its new phraseology, before the House of Lords on August 11th, when Lord Selborne, for the second time, in a short but powerful speech, again urged the Government to accept it. Viscount Peel, who was the Government's spokesman in the Chamber, was unsympathetic, and he announced in reply that the amendment would probably not be accepted by the Commons even if it were passed by the Lords. However, the House, apparently, was so entirely in favour of it, that the Government refused to take another Division; and the amendment was this time, therefore, declared carried.

To make assurance doubly sure that the amendment would also be carried on its return to the House of Commons, I saw the Parliamentary Secretary to the Board of Agriculture, Sir Arthur Griffith-Boscawen, on the subject on August 13th, in the latter's private room, and again there on the following night; and I very strongly pressed for its acceptance by him on behalf of the Government. This was obviously the last opportunity. The claims of the ex-Service men and others were urged, and I used every argument that I could think of at the moment. I did my best as I knew Mr. Collings was anxious. Time pressed. Within an hour or so of the latter interview, the Lords' Amendments were duly considered by the Commons: and Sir A. Griffith-Boscawen, on behalf of the Government, on this crucial one coming forward, stated, with evident pleasure, that the amendment would be—and it was—accepted. Sir Beville Stanier had remained in constant attendance in the House to ensure, if necessary, that the amendment should be adequately discussed before a Division was taken, if such a Division there was to be. As the House had sat all the previous night, and till late in the morning, Mr. Collings was especially grateful for this attention on Sir Beville Stanier's part. The Land Settlement (Facilities) Act, 1919, with the amendment, is now the law of the land.

Thus an effective policy of occupying ownership—so far as the class of small holders is concerned—for which Mr. Collings had been struggling in Parliament

for nearly forty years, and to which the Committee of the Rural League and the subscribers to that body had remained faithful adherents, was at last accepted by Parliament. The bar of "poverty" was no longer to be used as an argument against men who desired to buy land which was owned and let by a County Council in small holdings.

In order that there may be no doubt as to the effect of the amendment above referred to, it may be stated here that wherever there is now a tenant of land purchased for small holdings purposes by a County Council, that tenant may, if he has occupied it for six years, claim the right to become the owner of it, upon giving the County Council a month's notice; and, unless the County Council are able to secure the Board (now Ministry) of Agriculture's consent to refuse the claim, the occupier *will* become the owner of his holding. The Act also applies to all *future* small-holder tenants of land purchased for small-holdings purposes by a County Council and occupied by the tenants for six years. Moreover, and this is the climax, the purchase money of the holding, in each and every case, may be payable by the purchaser by means of a terminable annuity which may be spread over as long a period as sixty years unless he wishes to pay off the whole or any part of it at any earlier time. No longer will a man be required to put down at least a fifth of the purchase money before becoming the owner of his holding, as he was compelled to do by previous legislation.

Lord Lee of Fareham, who during the war was Director-General of the Food Production Department, is the Minister of State in charge of the agricultural affairs of the nation. Lord Lee is known to entertain progressive views, and it is Mr. Collings' earnest hope that his lordship will receive every sympathy and encouragement in endeavouring to put those views into practice. There is no doubt, Mr. Collings says, that the work so far accomplished under the Land Settlement (Facilities) Act, 1919, by Lord Lee is the greatest step<sup>1</sup> this country has yet taken in the way of actual land settlement; and although the present rate of progress can hardly be expected to be maintained, yet if every year land is acquired for settlement purposes

<sup>1</sup> By March 23, 1920, no less than 208,365 acres had been *acquired* for ex-service men, and the additional area then under consideration was 83,000 acres. The number of such men *actually in occupation* at that date was 4,372. (In the seven years 1908-14, *less than 2,000 persons per annum* were provided with land; whilst almost as much land was actually acquired in eleven months under the Act of 1919 as was acquired in the whole seven years referred to). By April 21 the number of men actually settled on the land had increased to 6,305 (England and Wales). These figures are far and away greater than those applicable to any Act dealing with land settlement prior to the Land Settlement (Facilities) Act, 1919 (passed in August of that year). The claims of the ex-service men naturally come first, and a sum of 20 millions sterling was set aside for settlement purposes under the Act of 1919. It must not, however, be thought by anyone that 20 millions is sufficient. It certainly will not be nearly enough even to settle the ex-service men applicants, to say nothing of settling the civilian applicants. No money can be better spent than in wisely settling people on the land, and it is to be hoped Parliament will not hesitate to support whatever the demands for funds may be upon it of the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, made through its chief and his responsible advisers.

and more people are settled thereon, in Mr. Collings' view, the time will come when the nation will have reason to bless the Act alluded to and the Minister who gave it impetus and steady direction.

Little now remains to be told. Owing to this (the chief) and other items in the Rural League's programme having been accepted,<sup>1</sup> the Committee of the League met at the House of Commons on November

<sup>1</sup> The Rural League also had on its later programme a Rural Cottages Bill (introduced into the House of Commons in 1913 and 1914), a Rural Credit Banks Bill (similarly introduced), and an Agricultural Loans Bill (introduced in 1914).

The Coalition Government in 1919 passed a Housing Bill of the most important character, and although it does not carry out to its full extent the principle of the Rural Cottages Bill, it does nevertheless allow—which was the chief point for which the Rural League had contended in its own Bill—of money being advanced to estate owners in rural districts to enable them to build cottages. The owner of an estate is obviously in a position to secure in the cheapest fashion the erection of rural cottages; hence the bringing in of the Rural Cottages Bill. As the principle of lending money to estate owners was accepted in the Housing and Town Planning Act of 1919, the Rural Cottages Bill was not proceeded with any further.

As to the Rural Credit Banks Bill (introduced in 1913 and 1914), the object of it was to secure from the State advances which would enable small holders to purchase live stock, implements, etc., for the cultivation or the better cultivation of their holdings. This principle has been incorporated in the Land Settlement (Facilities) Act, 1919, under which (by Clause 18) a County Council may make or guarantee an advance by way of loan to any tenant or prospective tenant of a small holding provided by the Council under the principal Act (i.e. the Small Holdings Act, 1908) of such sums as they think necessary for the purchase of live stock, fruit trees, fertilisers, and implements required for the purpose of the holding.

As to the Agricultural Loans Bill, the principle of this was carried out at any rate during the war, when arrangements were made by

13th, 1919, and decided that the League might creditably close its useful activities at the end of the then current year ; and it did so.

Mr. Collings was the recipient, next month, of a very handsome piece of plate, in the form of a silver tray, as a souvenir of his connection with the League and of his efforts for rural reform. The tray bears the signature, *in fac simile*, of the members of the Committee of the League, of its Vice-Presidents and of its Secretary ; these being placed around the following inscription in the body of the tray :

“ Presented by The Rural League to the Right Honourable Jesse Collings, President of the League 1888 to 1919, to commemorate his life-long work on behalf of Rural Britain.”

Resolutions of thanks for past service were also passed by the Committee of the League to Sir Beville Stanier, Bart., M.P., its indefatigable Chairman ; to myself as Secretary ; to the other members of the staff ; and to the very large number of working-men travelling agents and local residential agents of the League throughout the country.

Finally, Mr. Collings desires me to say that he is most deeply grateful for the sympathy, support,

the Board of Agriculture with joint-stock banks for the advancing of loans to farmers for the better cultivation of their land. The Bill itself, however, which was framed in the interests of tenant farmers, was not further proceeded with ; and under existing circumstances there seems no necessity for it.

and continuous work which have been rendered to him through the Rural League and otherwise over so many years : and that he hopes all who have in any way assisted him in it, will feel satisfaction at the achievement of objects which assuredly were well worth the effort each and all have made.









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